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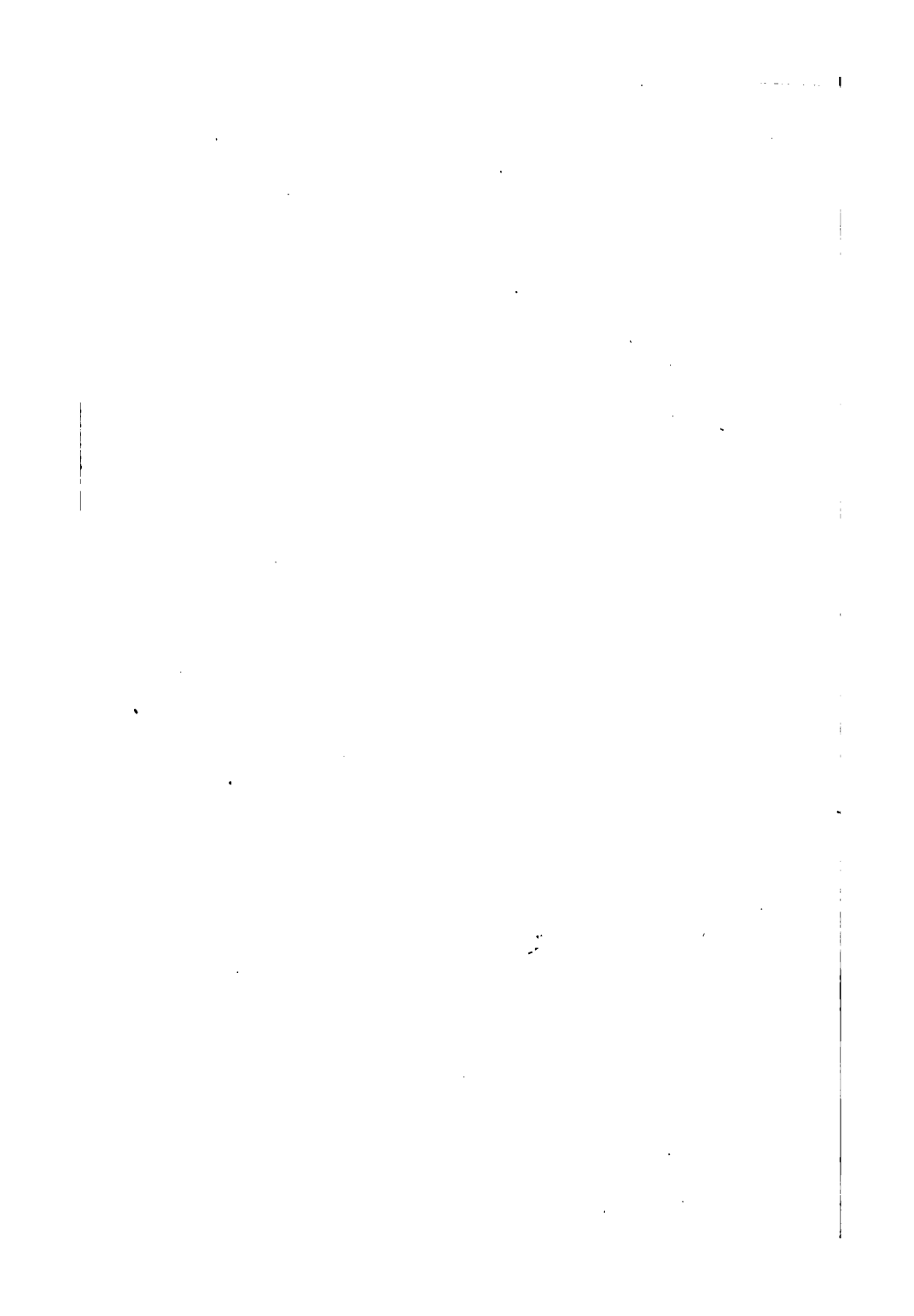




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# D A N D Y:

*A NOVEL.*

BY

JEAN MIDDLEMASS,

AUTHOR OF 'SACKCLOTH AND BROADCLOTH,' 'WILD GEORGIE,' 'SEALED BY  
A KISS,' 'INNOCENCE AT PLAY,' ETC. ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

VOL. III.



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## *CONTENTS.*



### CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
FIRING THE TRAIN, . . . . .	I

### CHAPTER II.

THE SCALES ARE REMOVED, . . . . .	18
-----------------------------------	----

### CHAPTER III.

ALL OR NOTHING, . . . . .	34
---------------------------	----

### CHAPTER IV.

A DINNER PARTNER, . . . . .	48
-----------------------------	----

### CHAPTER V.

FALSE SUSPICION, . . . . .	61
----------------------------	----

### CHAPTER VI.

BOLTED, . . . . .	78
-------------------	----



## CHAPTER VII.

	PAGE
THE INQUEST, . . . . .	96

## CHAPTER VIII.

TO THE BITTER END, . . . . .	112
------------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER IX.

'HE WAS MY HUSBAND,' . . . . .	129
--------------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER X.

WHOSE CHILD? . . . . .	148
------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XI.

COMING HOME, . . . . .	166
------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XII.

VENGEANCE, . . . . .	180
----------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XIII.

DENIS IN PRISON, . . . . .	194
----------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XIV.

BROUGHT TOGETHER, . . . . .	207
-----------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XV.

FOAMRIDGE, . . . . .	218
----------------------	-----



# DANDY.



## CHAPTER I.


### FIRING THE TRAIN.

**M**ISS BLANCHE ASTOR, with flashing eyes, is sitting alone in the boudoir which has been appropriated to her use in the American Minister's handsomely furnished house. The last number of the *Libeller* is on a little tripod table beside her. She has read the graphic account which, at Captain Denis' instigation, has been inserted in its pages, making at least four paragraphs. She has read it, and it were difficult to say.

whether surprise or indignation was the stronger feeling in her mind.

‘How dare they—how dare they write such things?’ she repeated over and over again with honest wrath; ‘of all the garbled accounts that have ever been inserted in a paper, this is the most scandalous. I should like to take that editor and bang his empty head for him. “Young American lady with great pretensions to beauty, whose charms lured him into unbidden territory,”—that’s me. It’s highly poetical, I have no doubt, but it isn’t true, and it’s very insolent. Oh, if I were a man, if I had any friend who was a man,’ she said, quoting Beatrice without exactly being aware of it.

The door was thrown open and Signor Guiseppe was announced. Our little Italian friend was Miss Astor’s singing-master, as well as of a great many other fashionable and distinguished ladies. She smiled at the idea of the fat, good-tempered-looking signor presenting himself at the moment she was clamouring for an avenger. She little guessed to what extent he was an actor in the drama being played out on



the stage of society, and of which last night's scene only had come to her knowledge.

Miss Blanche Astor liked her singing-master; she found his kindly nature genial and sympathetic, besides, she was bubbling over with anger, she must have some one to talk to; he was the first person who presented himself after she read those atrocious paragraphs, so she burst out with a full account of the whole affair, translating the newspaper extracts for his benefit into very fluent Italian, although the pronunciation bore a most unmistakable nasal twang.

Guiseppe listened silently to all she had to tell him, taking the story in very fully as she gave it in her rapid, incisive way.

Then he shrugged his shoulders, and observed that the English were always wrapped up so closely in their pride.

'It is not pride, it is lies,' cried Miss Astor, 'and lies that Lord Craigietoun and that editor, and all the vile crew ought to be made to suffer for. Oh, if I were a man I'd sledge-hammer them, and though I am but a woman, I'll see if I can't make myself

just a trifle obnoxious. Why, Mr Armfield—'

Signor Guiseppe interrupted her now very quickly.

'Armfield—my good friend Basil? He has been expelled from this salon—impossible!'

'Oh, you know him!' she exclaimed; 'that is good; well, take him that paper from me, and tell him if he has got a spark of bravery in him he'll throttle the man who wrote that article.'

'Poor Basil,' said Guiseppe feelingly, 'his hands are filled with the worries of life.'

'Ah, I thought he seemed rather clemmed up and abstracted when I sat next him at Mrs Polwhele's dinner the night before last. What is his story?'

But Guiseppe was too honourable to give his friend's history without permission, he only said that, as the signorina was acquainted with Mr Armfield, she would doubtless hear all about it from himself.

'Perhaps,' she answered. 'Anyhow, you go and fetch him here at once. Never mind my lesson. I could not sing to-day to save my life; I am much too excited.'

So Guiseppe went off to the office where, at this hour, Basil was most likely to be found, bearing with him, at Miss Astor's request, the copy of the *Libeller* which had roused her just indignation.

After waiting a few minutes, Basil came out to speak to him.

He laid the paper before him and gave him the American girl's message.

'I can do nothing—absolutely nothing,' he said very quietly when, having read the objectionable paragraph over twice, he returned the paper to the Italian tenor.

Guiseppe looked at him in wondering amazement. He could not understand how Basil could be so calm and self-possessed about an indignity which so nearly concerned himself, while he, Guiseppe, was all agog with excited fury on his friend's account.

Nor was it like Basil, who was wont to bubble over at the smallest offence given, and be ready to attack with too demonstrative fervour any aggressive individual.

Miss Astor would probably have ascribed Basil's quiescence under this insult to a 'Britisher's' respect for rank. Guiseppe set

it down to love for that young lady herself, which kept him from wishing to drag her name into the dispute.

In both instances the conclusion was a wrong one.

Basil cared nothing for Lord Craigietoun and his favour or disfavour; and as for the temporary passion which had been aroused in his heart for Blanche Astor, it had burnt fiercely and brilliantly for a brief space, and died out as suddenly as it was ignited.

If he saw Blanche Astor again,—saw her in the familiar relations of home life, and heard her regretting the unlucky chance which had persuaded him to accept Mrs Polwhele's proffered suggestion that he should accompany them to the ball, he did not know what effect her looks and tones might have upon his senses.

'No, he would not obey her summons. He intended to make no move in the matter; what use then to discuss it with this American siren?'

He gave Guiseppe no reason beyond that it was difficult to leave the office at that hour, and that he could not therefore come

to see Miss Astor ; besides, he was so worn out with plots and counterplots, that he intended to let things drift in the future.'

Guissepe raged volubly in his well-nigh incomprehensible French, but it was of no avail, and he was forced to go away and be the bearer of what message he could invent in order to calm Miss Astor, who was waiting in hot impatience for him to return with Basil.

Meantime, Basil went himself once more back to his papers in a lonely corner of the office which, from one reason and another, was, on that day, particularly empty. In fact, there was only one other man in the room with him, and he was one of those quiet, steady-going workers who drudge on without paying any great attention to what is happening around them.

He did not note that Basil, though he sat with his head buried among the sheets that lay before him, was thinking not at all of the *précis* writing on which he was supposed to be engaged, but, his elbows on the table, was immersed in a brown study.

Although he had taken his expulsion from



Lady Craigietoun's ball in so matter-of-fact a spirit when talking of it to Guiseppe, not even quailing before the garbled account of it given in the *Libeller*, it was not because he did not feel it acutely that he was thus cool. It was the very trouble into which the events of the last few days had plunged him, which made him so silent and reserved.

That something more had happened than the actual fracas in the ball-room and its concomitant annoyances, there seemed from Basil Armfield's manner to be little doubt. A something too which required, on his part, a long serious steady-going amount of thought. For more than half-an-hour he sat without moving, while his fellow clerk was scratching away unintermittently over the pages in front of him.

The reverie and the work were, however, at last once more interrupted by the entrance of the messenger with a card, which he gave to Basil Armfield.

'Lord Craigietoun, here?' he exclaimed.

'Yes, sir, his lordship is in the anteroom, and would like to see you.'

'Good gracious!' and Basil sprang up so

hastily that he upset the chair on which he had been sitting, and altogether exhibited far more alacrity than he had done for the last six or eight hours. The mention of Blanche Astor's name had not brought the hot colour mantling to his brow as the sight of Lord Craigietoun's card had done.

'Was it war or peace, and for which was he himself prepared?' he wondered, as he strode towards the door of the anteroom.

Lord Craigietoun held in his hand, as Guiseppe had done, a copy of the *Libeller*.

'I am sorry, Mr Armfield, to be compelled to bring a copy of this paper to you, sorry for the cause which has induced the insertion of a most obnoxious paragraph—in fact, in short, I have come to offer you an apology, which, however, so flagrant has been the manner in which you have been insulted—it would not surprise me if you were to refuse.'

'Might I ask to what interference I am indebted for this visit from your lordship?' said Basil, with much stiffness.

'To a sense of honour and justice,' was the reply. 'Will you kindly read those objectionable paragraphs, and say whether we cannot

together form some plan by which we may punish the writer of them.'

'I have already read them, and should prefer leaving the author of them in your hands. The only available way for an apology to reach me is through the medium of the same paper that has maligned and belied me.'

'You will not receive one from me?'

Lord Craigietoun looked at Basil in some surprise as he asked the question. His lordship was, as he had said, offering this apology from a sense of honour and justice. He had discovered from Mrs Polwhele, whom he had met out at dinner on the previous evening, exactly how the matter stood. Her evidence had shaken his belief in the rectitude of his own behaviour, while the paragraphs he had just read in the paper convinced him that some notice from him was due not only to Basil, but to himself.

When Lord Craigietoun was convinced by his own unprompted sense of right that any particular line of conduct was correct—he did not as a rule waste time in asking advice as to what he had better do.

He did not even mention the subject to

his wife, not for any especial reason, but because he did not happen to see her from the time of his reading the paragraphs till he went out with the *Libeller* in his pocket to call on Basil. Having acted thus independently, a somewhat unusual occurrence for his lordship, and one of which he was not a little proud, he was exceedingly surprised and considerably hurt at not being received in a more conciliatory spirit, and he flinched somewhat as Basil said coldly,—

‘A public insult requires a public apology, my lord.’

That reparation should be made in some degree to Basil, Lord Craigietoun felt, but of making that reparation publicly he had never dreamed. The man was a mere adventurer, and to be told that he, the Marquis of Craigietoun, was sorry for having ejected him from his house unceremoniously, believing him to have come in there in an unwarrantably intrusive fashion, was surely all that could be expected. To be received with hauteur and instructed to make a public apology in the *Libeller*—no, his lordship was by no means prepared for it!

‘A public apology,’ he repeated slowly, as though the words burned his lips as they fell. ‘But the unfortunate little event took place in a drawing-room. I do not see what it can concern those who dwell beyond the walls of drawing-rooms.’

Basil pointed to the *Libeller*.

‘Those paragraphs must be cancelled before I can accept any attempt at reconciliation.’

The young man’s attitude was so composed and self-reliant that it strengthened Lord Craigietoun’s belief that he had done an unjust thing when he had ejected Basil ignominiously from his house. There is little doubt that Lord Craigietoun was not altogether an obtuse or an obstinate man, though he was frequently blind and deaf.

‘I will write to the editor at once,’ he said, all the generosity in his nature leaping to the surface as he looked at Basil’s open countenance and remembered how this passionate act of his might mar the young man’s social advancement and perhaps ruin his chance in life.

Pens and ink were before him, and in a few minutes he had written a courteous letter to the editor, saying that he deeply regretted the mistake which, in a fit of intemperate wrath, had caused him to treat so unjustly Mr Basil Armfield, who, he hoped, would magnanimously look over the whole affair and permit him in future to inscribe his name on his scroll of friends.

Having finished this epistle he gave it to Basil to read, and then held out his hand to him.

Basil could remain wrapped in indignant anger no longer.

He took the peer's extended palm within his, as he said cheerily,—

‘Thank you, my lord, the courtesy with which you have performed this disagreeable mission quite equals and obliterates the discourteous act under which I have been smarting for the last two days.’

Lord Craigietoun fixed his eyes very closely on Basil's face for a moment or two without speaking. He prided himself on being somewhat of a physiognomist, and he was thinking how impossible it was that this young man, possessing as he did such

a clear eye and manly open brow, could be a double-faced hypocrite, who, while bestowing every mark of attention and devotion on Lady George, had robbed her of her only child.

So certain did he feel of Armfield's probity, that he almost felt inclined to put the question to him outright, and ask him if he knew of what horrid crime he was accused. He remembered, however, that their reconciliation was of too recent a date to be tampered with, and so the question died unspoken.

Basil himself to a certain extent anticipated it, for he went on,—

‘I am the more ready to accept this *amende*, because I believe the treatment I received from you was due more to an evil influence that has been exercised in my disfavour than to any real antipathy your lordship had against me personally.’

‘Antipathy! I never allow myself to be led by antipathy,’ answered Lord Craigietoun.

‘There has been a very sad and painful occurrence in your family lately, in which from the first, by a mere chance, I have

been more or less involved. This business, and the view I have taken of it, has made me several enemies ; in one instance, I suspect, rather a dangerous one, especially since he has more or less the ear of both your lordship and Lady Craigietoun.'

'You mean—'

'Captain Denis, who, whatever his professions may be, is, I am fully aware, no friend of mine.'

Lord Craigietoun smiled a peculiar sneering smile, as though half admitting the fact, half wondering why Basil alluded to Denis now.

He is Lady George's trustee.'

'I am aware of it,' answered Basil, with that same hauteur of manner he had maintained throughout his entire interview with Lord Craigietoun. For a moment or two he paused as though thinking out some abstract subject, then he seemed to take a sudden resolution, and said,—

'You are of course deeply interested in the calamity which has befallen Lady George? Would you mind making a few inquiries into Captain Denis' actions of late in connection with Lady George?'



‘Denis! What motives can he have for acting towards her in any manner which is not thoroughly straightforward?’

‘I do not presume to penetrate any man’s motives,’ said Basil stiffly. ‘I am only asking you if you care to ascertain facts.’

‘Certainly. However unwilling I may be to listen to anything against Captain Denis, who has proved himself the friend of my family, after what has passed, I think it is due to you that I should listen patiently to whatever you have to state,’ and he looked round as though for a chair.

‘Without giving it one atom of credence?’ said Basil, smiling. ‘No, Lord Craigietoun, all I ask you is to call on a certain lawyer of the name of Gibbs, living at 16 Bland Court, just out of Chancery Lane, and he will show you some documents he has lately drawn up at Denis’ request for Lady George Heriot to sign. That she has not signed them is not because she has not been asked to do so.’

Lord Craigietoun seemed taken aback.

‘Can this be true?’ he asked. ‘If Denis is not the straightforward man I have always believed him to be, I will never believe in honesty again.’

Basil shrugged his shoulders.

‘Prove him for yourself,’ he observed. ‘I do not wish or expect you to take any statement on my word. After you have called on Mr Gibbs, we will converse farther on the subject, if you like.’

‘I will go there at once,’ said his lordship, who was business-like enough if once roused. ‘Of course this matter is confidential?’

‘I care not,’ said Basil, with much indifference. ‘Hiding one’s hand from Denis has not proved particularly successful. I have a mind to try an open game.’

A few parting words, and Lord Craigietoun was gone, promising to return late in the day when he had seen Mr Gibbs.

Basil went back to his *précis* writing. He had fired the train, and his brow cleared as he hoped that in the excitement the explosion would create Dandy might be found.



## CHAPTER II.

### THE SCALES ARE REMOVED.

**W**HAT had passed between Basil and Lady George on the occasion of the ball scandal to make him so averse to take any active measures towards righting himself in the eyes of society generally?

When he conducted her to the carriage on the night in question, she pressed his hand as she got into it, and bade him come and see her on the morrow ; and Basil having returned the pressure, had wandered down the street away from the dizzy throng—away from the intoxicating influence of Miss Blanche Astor, and with Lady George's image hovering about him like that of some sweet spirit. He strolled across the Park

towards home, caring very little whether he ever reached it, so utterly dejected and wretched did he feel. He was not angry with Lord Craigietoun, but he was annoyed with himself for having trespassed where he was unwelcome, and felt more inclined to lay the blame on himself than on any other living soul, except perhaps Miss Astor, who at that moment he almost hated for the fact that her beautiful eyes had bewitched him into forgetting his own self-respect.

In his then frame of mind Basil was ready to assert that Lord Craigietoun was perfectly right in what he had done, and that he, Basil Armfield, alone was in the wrong—miserably, unutterably in the wrong. In fact, before he got home, he was almost prepared to tender an apology to Lord and Lady Craigietoun for his intrusion.

Nor did sleep make him look at things through a less hazy veil, for the very good reason that he did not have any, but making a cold bath stand in its place, ate his breakfast with a want of appetite which neither his mother nor Venetia failed to notice, and then went off to his office. There, all his

bright joviality of manner gone, he spoke so little to his fellow clerks that they came to the conclusion he was ill, and finally, as soon as he was free, he went off to Chapel Street for the usual friendly *tête-à-tête* in the downstairs boudoir.

There was a sort of embarrassment on both sides when he and Lady George first met. Basil still felt thoroughly ashamed of himself; she, too, was ashamed, but on her brother-in-law's account.

'That you should have been treated thus for me!' she said, pressing the hand he placed in hers with a warmth which Lady George had never evinced for Basil before—thus in one more instance verifying the truth of the accepted belief that there is nothing like opposition to strengthen a woman's love.

'Do not speak of it, dear Lady George,' and the hot blood rushed to his very temples at the thought that it was scarcely for her he had risked Craigietoun displeasure by accepting Mrs Polwhele's invitation. Oh, how he hated Blanche Astor at that moment!

To think that for the space of one short half-hour he had been false, even in fancy, to his allegiance !

If he dared have followed the bent of his inclination, he would have thrown himself at her feet, and poured forth all the fulness of his overcharged heart ; as it was, he only bent over the hand which trembled in his as he looked into her eyes, and muttered a few words of passionate devotion.

She did not repulse or silence him, as she usually did, but turning away from him with a sigh, leant her head against the mantelpiece.

‘I cannot give you any hope,’ she said ; ‘how can you ask it when you know so well the despair that is lying at my heart ? My child, my poor child !’

It was the same old story of her first love being for Dandy, but somehow there was a difference in the tone, and Basil’s eyes brightened as he heard it. It seemed to imply that Dandy found there was some hope for him, and Basil still firmly believed that Dandy would eventually be found, if

only they persevered in the following up of Denis.

‘When Dandy is found?’ he asked, going close up to her as she stood turning from him, then she held her hand out to him once more, but without looking at him.

‘After what you endured last night, there is no token of my personal regard so great that I will not bestow it on you.’

To hear such words as these, Basil would gladly have been turned out of every ball-room in London.

‘Tell me, dearest Lady George, when Dandy comes home you will be mine—you will reward my patient devotion with some—’

Once more she pressed his fingers as she said, in almost inaudible tones,—

‘When Dandy comes back, Basil, I will be yours.’

He heard every word, low as the words were spoken. It was the first time she had ever called him Basil.

‘Dearest, darling, sweetest Julia,’ he cried with an energy that startled her, and seemed to recall her to her normal calm self-possession.

‘Recollect,’ she said, ‘not one word of this must be broached to any one, or I shall no longer feel bound by my promise. It is indelicate to talk of love at this moment, when Dandy may never be found.’

‘I will breathe of our compact to no one only dream in my solitary hours of the great, the surpassing joy that awaits me in the future. Meantime, you will let me comfort you, console you in your sorrow, will you not?’

‘It seems to me that I have always very gladly accepted your sympathy,’ she said with a smile; ‘it is scarcely necessary that you should plead to console; but do not let us talk any more of this. Tell me what you propose to do about last night. How did you get to Margaret’s ball?’

‘Mrs Polwhele took me.’

‘Mrs Polwhele!’

‘Yes, I was dining there, and she said she had *carte blanche* to take as many dancing men as she liked.’

Lady George thought for a moment or two. It was evident that this information gave her intense satisfaction. Then she said,—



‘Will you promise me not to take any steps towards forcing Lord Craigietoun to make you the apology which is unquestionably your due, at all events till I give you leave?’

‘I was thinking of apologising to Lord Craigietoun,’ said Basil, with a meekness that was almost comic.

It made her give a little scream of surprise.

‘You! What for?’

‘For allowing myself to be persuaded to enter a house where I had not first ascertained if I should be welcome.’

‘Nonsense,’ cried Lady George, ‘do not do anything so foolish, I beg. Craigietoun has insulted you, or rather he has insulted me through you, for the impertinence was intended solely for me. He shall make me the *amende*.’

Basil Armfield smiled, as he thought it was perhaps this very insult on Lord Craigietoun’s part which had made him feel happier to-day than he ever remembered to have felt in his life. He was right. It was the old story of opposition only serving to make a woman the more positive. Lady George

considered that Basil had been made a victim and a laughing-stock on her account. She resolved, then, to make him all the compensation in her power, even to promising him her hand as soon as Dandy came home.

For the rest, she would settle matters with her relations. She did not think that either Lord or Lady Craigietoun were particularly desirous of lying under the ban of her displeasure, and she did not therefore imagine there would be much difficulty in making them amenable to reason, if only Basil would promise not to interfere.

Of course he would do anything, everything she liked, and consented, without a demur, to rest gently on his oars and await what should befall in *re* Craigietoun.

How could either of them conjecture that the *Libeller* would make itself busy about the affair, and that Lord Craigietoun, seized with a fit of compunction, would go off to look up Basil on his own account.

'*Rien n'arrive que l'imprevu*,' says the French proverb, and so it was in this instance.

After Basil left her, Lady George sat very still for a long while thinking. She had taken a somewhat desperate step, one which would in all probability involve her in a good deal of difficulty and embarrassment, yet she did not wholly regret it. Her love for Basil was very strong—far stronger than she had owned, even to herself, till she had become sensible of her own mortification at seeing him snubbed and insulted ; still she was not exactly prepared at this moment to grant him the place of successor to her late husband, whom she had cherished and loved with a very deep devotion.

Things had, however, been hurried to a climax by other people's interference, and the Craigietouns, having driven her to extremity, must be made to stand by her in any seemingly foolish act which they themselves had brought about.

Next day, about luncheon time, she would go to Eaton Square, and the storm should burst. Having come to this determination, she went upstairs to dress for her solitary dinner—of late she had refused all invitations, except those she was forced into accepting,

---

and the rest of the evening she passed in a sort of dream, of which Basil and Dandy played the *dramatis personæ* in spasmodic turns.

She had not been to call in Eaton Square since the day she and Lady Craigietoun had had that somewhat angry dispute about Basil's invitation. She was, however, most graciously received. The marchioness felt that she had put herself in the wrong, and that reconciliation was the best way to recover lost ground.

They neither of them alluded to the subject which was to the fullest exercising both their minds, and neither of them perhaps knew exactly how to break ground, and while they were still mentally debating the question, luncheon was announced. While the servants were in the room none save general subjects were of course discussed, and they had not gone before Lord Craigietoun came in and sat down at the table, a most unusual occurrence, since the marquis spurned the idea of eating luncheon, and seldom honoured his wife with his presence at this hour.

‘Where have you been, Craigietoun?’

‘To the club,’ was the short reply, and he laid a copy of the *Libeller* on the table.

‘I saw this paper there, and I brought a copy of it for your edification.’

He read out the paragraphs about Basil, stopping every minute or two to note the impression made on the two ladies.

Lady Craigietoun listened with a toss of the head and a sort of sniff, remarking when he had finished reading,—

‘Well, thank goodness, no one blames us. The American beauty alluded to is of course Blanche Astor; I thought she seemed exaggeratedly anxious to screen him. They are both adventurers, so—’

The rest of her sentence remained unuttered, for Lady George, who had started up, as though making a violent effort to master the emotion which was overpowering her, fell unconscious across an arm-chair which was behind her, and which she had clutched hold of for support. In a moment Lord Craigietoun’s arm was round her, and he placed her, with a tenderness for which he was scarcely celebrated, in the chair. Lady

Craigietoun meanwhile did not attempt to move. She seemed shocked and horrified to such a degree that she was rendered utterly passive. She had blamed her sister-in-law for encouraging Mr Armfield, principally because Captain Denis had insinuated that he was an unfit acquaintance for any of the family; but till that moment she had never believed that she really loved him. For a second or two only did Lady George remain in the position in which the marquis had placed her. She struggled with and overcame the temporary weakness, repeating, however, Blanche Astor's name in a very low tone as she wearily lifted her head and untied her bonnet, as though its string oppressed and choked her.

Lord Craigietoun took her hand and pressed it kindly.

'There is not a word of truth in the report,' he said; 'I have just seen Armfield, and written a letter to the *Libeller*, contradicting what is false, and apologising for the uncourteous severity with which I myself behaved.'

'Craigietoun, you have not done this?'

almost shrieked his wife, whilst Lady George gently returned his pressure and looked a grateful thanks with her soft gazelle-like eyes.

He turned from her to meet his wife's more flashing, irate glances, but she did not give him time to expostulate or explain; she burst forth into invectives against Armfield, Miss Astor, Mrs Polwhele, her sister-in-law, in fact every one concerned in the affair, with a fierceness which, save for the more temperate and refined language, was worthy in wrathful injustice to the diatribe of any irate fish fag in the land.

Neither of her two listeners attempted to stop her. How could they? They were far too much taken aback by this sudden outburst of feeling to have a word at command. If Lady George had revealed her feelings when she nearly fainted on hearing the paragraph in the *Libeller*, Lady Craigietoun was as assuredly showing hers, for she acknowledged all too plainly that the real mover and promoter of the entire cabal against Mr Armfield was none other than her own particular friend and ally, Henry Denis.

He could not have worked this part of his scheme against Basil without enlisting Lady Craigietoun's sympathies in his cause, yet he had never done a more unwise thing than when he made a *confidante* of this grand lady, who, marchioness though she was, could not keep that unruly member the tongue within the bounds prescribed by policy. It was, too, an especially inauspicious moment for such a revelation, since the marquis, who had come straight from his interview with Basil, was almost entirely converted to that young man's views about Denis, to the extent at least of resolving to set a watch on the black captain, who, it appeared, figured to such an alarming extent on the platform of the marchioness's good graces.

Lord Craigietoun was, however, too idle to be jealous, and too wise to be verbose. He stood looking from his sister-in-law to his wife, and from his wife to his sister-in-law with a half-amused, half-astonished expression which was rather comic, then he said, with a sort of irritating quietness,—

‘My dear Margaret, I am sorry I cannot



listen to any farther discussion of this subject. I have done what I thought right in the matter, and hope you will have the good taste to receive Mr Armfield with cordiality when he calls, as I have invited him to do ?'

'Never. Captain Denis says—'

'Hush! I do not wish to hear what Denis says. I am the master of this house, not Denis. If it had not been for the unfortunate way in which you are misguided by him, this affair would never have happened.'

'Really, Craigietoun, you must be mad.'

'No, Margaret, I have only had the scales taken from my eyes.'

'And I am positive this Mr Armfield has bewitched you as he has bewitched Julia.'

'Perhaps,' and Lord Craigietoun laughed; 'he is a very bewitching young fellow.'

Lady Craigietoun stamped her foot in anger and sailed out of the room. She evidently considered that farther expostulation was useless.

Lady George got up and tied on her bonnet, her brougham was at the door.

‘Craigietoun,’ she said, as she held out her hand to him, ‘you can never know how deeply I am indebted to you for what you have done to-day.’

‘Nothing, Julia, nothing. I have only tried to remedy my own fault. It was very foolish of me to allow myself to be dragged into committing such a rudeness, but I thought Margaret was to be relied on. I understand it all now, however, the machinery by which she allows herself to be moved is Denis, and Denis—well, we will not judge him prematurely.’

Lady George’s countenance brightened at the discovery that he shared her mistrust of Captain Denis; but she was afraid to say much about it, so, merely reiterating her thanks, and begging him to come and see her soon, she went off to the carriage and drove straight home.

Perhaps Basil would come, she had made no appointment with him, still he would surely come to tell her what had happened.

When she reached her own house in Chapel Street, Captain Denis was standing on the door-step.



## CHAPTER III.

### ALL OR NOTHING.

**L**ADY GEORGE never saw anyone now who was at all connected with the search, without instantly thinking that they might bring her news of her lost and grieved-for boy. She did not even believe at all times that Captain Denis was false. He could not, she would argue, be so utterly heartless as to withhold tidings of Dandy if he had any to give her.

But for this reasoning, as it were, against hope, the sight of Denis had now come upon her as a cloud obscuring what little sunshine in life remained.

A flitting smile of hope, which the captain in his selfishness forgot to attribute to its proper cause, lit up for a second her wan

sad face, as holding out her hand to him she put the eternal question.

‘What news?’

‘Alas!’ he replied, ‘dearest Lady George, the fates are still our enemies,’ and he contrived to throw a melancholy pathos into his voice which had its effect, because it was not overdone.

At this moment the door was opened and they entered the house. No sooner were they seated than the lady perceived that if Captain Denis had nothing to tell her on the subject next her heart, there was evidently another matter on which he was anxious to unburden his mind, but to open which caused him much hesitation and difficulty. Of course all this was mere acting, like all the rest of this admirable officer’s life, but Lady George had hitherto only learnt to suspect—not to see through him. She grew very nervous as she wondered what he could possibly be going to say; then she remembered those unsigned documents, and feared a coming tussle, for she was resolved that nothing should make her put her name to them.

It was not, however, of documents that Henry Denis had come to talk that day. He had come to try and force the citadel, to possess himself of Lady George's person and fortune, if it were possible, by a *tour de force*.

Captain Denis believed, and perhaps rightly, that the hour had come when matters must reach a crisis; and that now or never he must win the ground from under Basil Armfield's feet.

He got up from the seat into which he had thrown himself when he first entered the room, and began to walk excitedly up and down.

She, meanwhile, sat trembling in the corner of the sofa. That little room, how many strange scenes had taken place in it of late—was this one destined to exceed them all, she wondered?

She did not speak, but left Captain Denis to throw up the ball unaided, which he did after what he probably considered a telling pause; and his words when they did come were very much to the purpose, for, casting aside all his usual restraint of manner, he

assumed with much *abandon* the part of a desperate, enthusiastic, and adoring suitor, almost taking her breath away by the passion with which he contrived to strengthen his looks and voice as he told her in a few rapid sentences, how for years, even before George Heriot died, she had been the one arch-love of his life. That to win her he would dare anything, everything, and that having won her, he would be through life till death her devoted slave.

Lady George looked at him aghast. To one of her placid temperament such violence of feeling was unknown, and it frightened more than it moved her.

When at last he stopped, fairly as it seemed exhausted by the tumults of his own emotions, she could only gasp in answer,—‘I am very sorry—very sorry, but I cannot—oh, it is impossible!’

Captain Denis, however, had come there to arouse some stronger sentiment than mere sorrow. If he could not inspire love, well, let it be fear. Strange how nearly hate and love are allied in some breasts. Henry Denis was determined if

he could not make Lady George love him, she should drink to the very dregs the bitterest cup of anguish that was ever prepared for woman.

‘Impossible!’ he said; ‘that is a word only weak natures can comprehend. You and I are not weak, Lady George. To us nothing is impossible.’

‘No, I am not weak,’ she replied, rousing herself, as something in his tone stung her by its concealed insolence; ‘at least I do not think I am weak. It is in my very strength that I say I can never love you.’

He sat down once more beside her, and seemingly restraining his feelings with a mighty effort, he spoke in a very subdued and impressive voice.

‘Do you think I am not aware that another has come between us, poisoned your ear and heart against me. Oh, Lady George, beware how you nurse a viper in your bosom! The curling reptile will sooner or later lift its head to sting. I am sorry—very sorry, to speak thus of any man, who goes about more or less in the same society that we do ourselves;

but circumstances compel me—I must be honest. I had hoped that what occurred at Lady Craigietoun's ball would have cured you ; but women, however charming, amiable, and graceful, are all more or less the victims of shortsightedness. You—'

'Stop, Captain Denis. That ball affair has all been fully explained, and an apology made by Craigietoun.'

'Never!' cried Captain Denis, utterly taken aback. 'The Craigietouns can never have been guilty of such a folly. Lady Craigietoun at least has the sense to *suspect* this man of the foul play of which I *know* he has been guilty.'

'You—you know. What do you know?'

'Promise to be my wife, and from this time forward there shall be no secrets between us.'

Lady George got up and stood by the mantelpiece, quivering from head to foot with anger.

'Speak, Captain Denis, tell me what you *know*. I command you. I will give no promise ; you have no right to ask one from me ; you are my husband's executor,



and as such should protect my rights. If you know anything of the whereabouts of your dead friend's child, speak at once and say what is it. For any other knowledge, surreptitious or otherwise, that may have come to you, I care nothing.'

'Unless you would drive me mad, do not look at me with those flashing eyes,' cried Denis, advancing towards her; 'you are more beautiful than ever in your wrath.'

She turned from him with an angry gesture.

'I do not wish for any tribute of admiration from you. I only want an answer to my question, whether you do or do not know aught that will lead to the discovery of my child?'

Denis dropped his adoring manner and grew business-like and formal.

'Look you, Lady George, I know enough to swear to you on the Bible, if you will, that the day you become my wife Dandy shall be in the church to meet you.'

'Ah,' and she gave a piercing scream

that was half joy, half anxious horror ; 'you know this, and you do not bring him to me here, now—now, at this very moment ! Henry Denis, you are a heartless, bad man.'

'There are some things so difficult to do, it would not be wise to risk them without the certainty of a great reward.'

'And you wish to insinuate that Basil Armfield has hidden away my child, for what—why should he do this thing ?'

'To force you into marrying him, sooner or later, I presume,' answered Denis coldly ; 'he is a mere underbred adventurer, that could scarcely be expected to think such a course an ignoble one.'

The daring impudence of the assertion so staggered Lady George, that she failed utterly to see he was using Basil's name to sketch his own case.

Dandy was all she thought of at that moment, as she cried out,—

'I will send for Mr Armfield. I will kneel to him, implore him, weep to him ; he cannot, will not be so brutal as to keep my boy when he knows his absence is killing me !' Then she turned to Denis with

a sudden change of manner, 'But it is not true. I will not believe it. Basil is too well principled. I will prove to you that—'

But Denis stopped her.

'You must not mention one word of this conversation to Basil Armfield, or within twenty-four hours of your having done so, you will receive the corpse of your child!'

Lady George did not faint or scream when she heard this awful announcement, but she looked at him as though a sudden horror had deprived her of reason.

He waited for a few seconds till a glimmering of understanding seemed to come slowly back to her, then he said,—

'The person from whom during a drunken bout I received this information, and who is, I presume, more or less a creature of Armfield's, assures me that he has sworn if he is ever proved to have feloniously detained your child, he will not be convicted by halves, that murder shall be the count on which he will be tried. You understand now, Lady George, to what desperate

lengths the power of your beauty can drive a man.'

'O God!—my child—my child!' cried Lady George, falling on the sofa with a sort of yell that in its ferocious tenderness resembled that of some wild animal bewailing the loss of its young.

Denis went up to her and tried to soothe her, but she repulsed him with savage scorn.

She did not say she either believed or disbelieved his tale, but however false she might be persuaded into thinking Basil, his baseness would never render her any the more disposed to tolerate Henry Denis.

For some time she remained very still in the corner of the sofa, looking in a sort of vague way into space, while Denis stood on the hearth-rug and watched her. She appeared entirely to have forgotten his presence, so absorbed was she in her own miserable reflections. At last he spoke to her, tried to rouse her from her apathetic condition, but she did not answer him, or even appear to know that he had spoken. She had not fainted, but she sat there gazing with those wide open eyes as though

she had suddenly become turned into a statue.

Bored by his own failure in rousing her, he rang the bell violently and sent for her maid.

‘The tidings I have been compelled to give Lady George,’ he exclaimed, ‘have upset her nerves somewhat. Perhaps I had better leave her in your care for a while—I will return later. In the meantime, do not let her be seen by any one. Tell her I am gone on her business, and I hope to bring her better tidings.’

But it was very useless for Captain Denis to give the maid messages for her ladyship. All her efforts to rouse her proved quite as ineffectual as his had been.

Could it be possible that the torturing suspense and anxiety she had gone through of late, had at last chased the power of reasoning and thinking away from the throne where they had hitherto reigned supreme?

The maid, alarmed, sent for the family doctor. He shook his head with much gravity, but did not venture to state any opinion, only desired the maid to keep

her mistress very quiet, and above everything to admit no visitors.

When, however, Basil Armfield arrived, which he did about five o'clock, he insisted on seeing her, and the servants, accustomed to his frequent visits, and almost prepared to look on him as their future master, did not judge it expedient to refuse him, so he was admitted to the boudoir where Lady George still sat in very much the same position in which Henry Denis had left her.

When Basil went in she treated him as she had done her usual attendants, and did not seem to know him from them. For a time at all events it would clearly be impossible for her to tell Basil anything about the awful imputation which Captain Denis had cast on him, even if a half dread lest it should be true would not have kept her from doing so under any circumstances.

Basil was like a maniac when he saw Lady George. He had come there, hoping to interest and please her by his account of his interview with Lord Craigietoun.

'What did it mean? The key-note of the situation was, however, given him when he

was informed that Captain Denis had been there, though of course of the nature of his communication nothing had transpired.

Not content with the opinion of the family Æsculapius, Basil called a hansom and drove off as fast as a good horse could take him in search of a specialist, who made diseases of the brain and nerves his province. Two or three were out, but he succeeded in finding a man of some celebrity, and brought him back with him in his cab.

‘Her nervous system, already in a weakened state, must have had a severe shock,’ he said. ‘Let her maid undress her and put her into bed in a darkened room, where she must remain perfectly quiet; no one at all but the person in attendance must go in. I trust and hope that, in a few days at farthest, nature will recover itself and she will gradually struggle back to consciousness.’

‘A few days,’ cried Basil. ‘Do you think she will remain without knowing any one for a few days!’

‘I said at farthest. In a few hours she may be herself again. I will prescribe something to be taken every two hours which will,

I think, tend to assist the work which, in all honesty I must say it, depends chiefly on nature and an absence of excitement to effect. Poor lady, she must have had a terrible amount of anxiety to reduce her to this state.'

'Ay, and hanging is not too bad for him who has brought her to it.'

'Her husband?' asked the doctor.

'Certainly not; she is a widow. I mean the man who has abducted her only child.'

'Of course, of course, the case that has been so often mentioned in the papers—Lady George Heriot. Yes, of course, I remember. And the boy is not found?'

Basil shook his head. He was in no mood to discuss the Dandy case as though it were a mere topic of public interest with this stranger, so, having got the prescription and paid the fee, since there was no member of the family there to do it, he was rather glad to say good day to the doctor, and while the maid carried out the remainder of his orders, Basil determined to go to Lord Craigietoun and inform him of this fresh cloud which was passing over Lady George's life.





## CHAPTER IV.

### A DINNER PARTNER.

**T**HE expression of Henry Denis' face when he left the Chapel Street house and strode off eastwards was scarcely of a character either to inspire love or to conduce to the belief that he himself possessed a strong faculty for loving. Hate, on the contrary, was the ruling passion traced on his frowning, contracted brow.

He had been tossing the dice of fortune unsuccessfully, and he began to dread the terrible consequences of loss.

Unaccustomed to failure, his passion for Lady George, which, had it been even mildly reciprocated, would probably have died out almost before it existed, was fos-

tered and increased by opposition till it became a very madness. Denis' usually keen intellect bowed before it, till he was a mere puppet at the caprice of this one strong feeling, maddening him to crime.

Crime, however, with Henry Denis could not assume even the semblance of a noble form. His mind was so deformed that he could not resist mixing up interest with his vengeance. He had stolen Dandy away to be revenged on Lady George for her slight of him ; but he at the same time sought to render that very abduction the means whereby he should ingratiate himself into her high favour, almost endangering his own safety in the acknowledgment which, in the desperation of the last hour, he had judged it fitting to make.

But the game was up, he concluded, as he walked towards Holborn ; and if little Dandy had been near him at that moment it would have gone hard with the poor innocent unsuspecting child, who had been made so brutally the victim of his mother's love for Basil Armfield.

Denis at that moment felt that he must have some one on whom to wreak his fury. The object of his walk towards Holborn was to find Jim. Jim, whom he had not seen for some weeks, nor, in fact, wished to see, since he had scarcely been in the possession of funds to meet Jim's exorbitant requirements. He wanted to find him now, however; wanted to see if matters could but be brought to some sort of climax. Denis was tired of this shilly-shallying under the mask of respectability with a future which seemed to grow more distant every hour. Lady George would none of him. If he could only induce Jim to put the child out of the way so neatly that the blame should rest on Basil Armfield, well, then his vengeance would be complete, and he would go abroad for a while, till the whole affair should be a thing of the past.

Revolving plots and counterplots over and over in his mind, he did not observe two men who were standing at the corner of Rathbone Place, or perhaps the sight of at least one of them might have made even Denis quail. The one was a tall Italian

but lately arrived in London, the other was Mr Green, got up to represent an Italian singer.

‘Why, there’s our man,’ Green ejaculated as Denis passed.

An announcement which was echoed by his companion’s exclamation of—

*‘Da vero, per dio vivo! E lo detto bricconde!’* It is him same!’

Thus without the slightest difficulty establishing the very identity of which they were about to start in search.

The Italian was one of the leading members of the association of which Denis, as secretary, had abducted the funds when in Italy. Denis walks on without looking up, and the two men follow him; Green because he is always especially interested in keeping an eye on Denis’ transactions, the Italian because he happens to be with him there.

Ben Haller’s is Denis’ destination, but Jim is not there, has not been there for a week or more.

‘No, they don’t know his address; he ain’t given to leavin’ addresses, isn’t Jim.’

‘If he calls here will they tell him Mr Dent wants him?’

‘Just so,’ and Ben Haller smiles. He has his own reasons for not believing in Denis’ *alias* of Mr Dent.

Next, Denis pays a visit to the tobacconist’s shop, but that is shut up, and a big ‘To Let’ is on the shutter.

Where can Jim be? Jim, whom, since he has discovered his drunken proclivities, Henry Denis dreads only one degree less than the police. For the last time he, however, is resolved to use him, and, if possible, get rid of both him and the boy in one clever *coup*.

For a moment he thinks of going to Smith Street, then he remembers that Giuseppe Belsospiro lodges there, and he hesitates. Yet why should he fear this Signor Guiseppe? the little fat Italian is nothing to him. He turns suddenly to put his project into execution, and comes face to face with the two foreigners, who are still on his track.

An exclamation of angry fear rises to his lips, but he suppresses it, passes them, and calls a hansom that is crawling by.

‘*O ladro maledetto!*’ mutters the real

Italian to the sham one. 'Look you, I hold him ; he shall scamper not from me.'

'All right—come on. Don't take any notice. It is no use following him now. He'll go out of this 'ere track now he's seen us.'

And Green was right. Denis gave the cabman the Chapel Street address in a very loud voice, and drove straight to Lady George's house.

He did not receive much encouragement there.

Her ladyship was much the same. She had gone to bed, and the two doctors who had seen her both expressly said she was not to be disturbed. The butler believed Lord Craigietoun had been sent to. By a sort of intuition, which upper servants very frequently possess, he most carefully avoided all mention of Basil Armfield's name.

'Was Lady George going to die?'

Here was a knotty question on which Henry Denis allowed his mind to exercise itself during the drive to St James' Place, for he had kept his hansom, evidently not

wishing to risk another encounter with the little Italian pedestrian.

Was Lady George going to die? He believed himself to be desperately, frantically in love with her; yet, with that query strong in his mind, he dressed himself very deliberately for dinner, and once more sallied forth to a large party to which he had been invited down in the neighbourhood of Queen's Gate.

There he met the Polwheles, and behind Mrs Polwhele Blanche Astor walked with her graceful undulation of movement into the room.

The bow which passed between her and Captain Denis was of the stiffest. They knew each other but slightly, and she had always had an instinctive hatred of him, and Miss Astor was one of those women who made no concealments of her likes and dislikes.

Denis of course attributed her treatment of him now to the supposition that she knew something about his connection with the newspaper paragraphs—his guilty conscience scarcely permitting him to look her openly

in the face, but it made him assume a sort of swagger which he intended for *sang froid*, and which was most offensive to Miss Astor.

Of course the scene at Lady Craigietoun's ball was discussed—society loves a social scandal, and is never happier than when pulling to pieces a member of its own body. Denis, by one of those coincidences which so frequently brings the wrong people together, though he did not take Miss Astor in to dinner, sat next her on the other side.

He winced somewhat when the subject was brought up, especially since everyone present took Basil Armfield's part.

Miss Astor turned to him and said very pointedly,—

‘That paragraph writer, if he wanted to floor Mr Armfield, has, I guess, defeated his own ends.’

‘Oh, I don't suppose he knew anything about Armfield; he probably only wanted to sell his paper.’

‘And that is the way papers are made to sell in this country—well, it doesn't say much for the honour of the editor.’



‘The statement was a true one,’ remarked Denis a little carefully.

‘Was it? It was the basest tissue of lies that was ever strung together by a systematic story-teller—that’s so.’

‘Indeed. Then perhaps you know more of the facts as they really happened than I do.’

‘If you didn’t know about them, I wonder why you volunteered information?’

She had found out then that he had had something to do with this matter—but how?’

‘I?’ he said, looking astonished. ‘I do not write for the *Libeller*.’

‘Never supposed you did, but there are other ways of getting paragraphs put into papers without writing them, and spies are paid better than honest men in most countries.’

Denis felt the blood rush into his face, but he dared not show his annoyance without acknowledging that she had obtained some correct information. He did not venture to speak, and she went on,—

‘I’m an American,’ she said, talking with a very strong nasal twang, as though to accentuate the fact. ‘In my country we

don't brook insult, and whether we are men or women, we manage somehow to hold our own. I haven't got any male relations, at all events not here, so I went down to the office of the *Libeller* myself this morning. I took a good horsewhip in my hand, and I'd have used it too if the editor had not been a puny wretch, who wasn't worth the whipping.'

'You!' exclaimed Denis.

'Why, certainly. You don't suppose I was going to stand out in the cold and let you have it all your own way? Blanche Astor generally manages to be in the front row, you bet.'

'And your interview with the editor of the *Libeller* resulted in—'

'My finding out that *you* were at the bottom of the transaction. Oh, he did not tell me, so you needn't go and blow his brains out; not that you would; you couldn't stand the talk it would occasion. You see I'm pretty straight in my way of speaking. I found it out through—'

'There must be some mistake,' said Denis.

‘Not a shade of one. There was a piece of paper lying on the table, covered with notes — “ Henry Denis’ information ” — “ Craigietoun’s ball ”—among others.’ I’ve got sharp eyes as well as a sharp tongue ; and all that I wish to say in conclusion is, that if you and that precious editor are ever admitted again to a London ball-room, I won’t think much in future of the high-class Britishers.’

‘I assure you,’ persisted Denis, ‘you are labouring under some mistake.’

‘Don’t talk gammon, Captain Denis. I wasn’t born yesterday, and I know when I’m right and when I’m wrong.’

‘But Miss Astor—’

‘There—we have had quite enough of it. Just you mind how you dabble with Blanche Astor’s name in future. Now, I’m going to devote myself to my partner on the other side.’

Miss Astor thought she had read Denis a lesson by letting him know she was *au courant* with his meanness in supplying private information to public journals, but she little knew how severe was the lesson

she had given him—that the knowledge that he had been undermining Basil Armfield, once set about and magnified, would go farther to injure his reputation and his possibility of clearing himself from the imputation of being engaged in a deep plot, than Miss Astor could possibly have foreseen.

During the remainder of dinner he was very silent. It was evident that what he had just heard had given him more than ample food for reflection.

Blanche Astor did not address another word to him. She had fully made up her mind to drop Captain Denis' acquaintance in the future, and she sailed past him out of the room when the ladies left the table, with scorn and contempt curling the corners of her pretty mouth.

But it was not for contempt and scorn that Henry Denis cared, but for her tongue. What would she say of him, and how much of it would be believed?

He was soon, however, too much engrossed by other matters to give even the mischief Blanche Astor could do him more than a secondary place in his consideration.

He drank a good deal of wine after dinner—a thing he rarely permitted himself to do in public, and was still sitting in the dining-room when a servant brought him a dirty-looking note, which he said had just been left by a young boy, who requested it might be given to Captain Denis directly.

Denis read it, and telling his host that important business called him away, lost no time in quitting a house where the events of the evening had scarcely proved altogether propitious.

To show why Henry Denis had been sent for in such hot haste, it is necessary to return once more to Mercy and her fortunes.





## CHAPTER V.

### FALSE SUSPICION.

**I**N the parlour behind the tailor's shop in Smith Street there has lately burst into life one of those friendships, the growth of which no difference of class or position seems to stunt. It is between Venetia Armfield and Mercy, and it came about through the intervention of Guiseppe Belsospiro. Guiseppe had always liked the little maid who kept his rooms so nice and neat, and when she married and went off to a house of her own he missed her terribly. The old woman who came to tidy up a bit for Job, tidied up by no means to the Italian singer's satisfaction, and personally he was right glad to see Mercy back again ; but Guiseppe's kindly nature

grieved over what he supposed the young wife's unhappy position to be. He could only guess at it, for she uttered no word, nor, on the one only occasion when he sought to have some conversation with Job, could he elicit any particulars of how matters stood with Mercy.

At the end of one of her singing-lessons he had told Venetia all he knew of the Smith Street *ménage*, and she had at once suggested that she would go and see Mercy about some ironing, and thus discover if she could not in some way be useful to her. Mercy, though of a genial disposition, did not unfold easily on the subject of Jim, and although from the first she took a great fancy to Miss Armfield, it was not till she had seen her several times that she could be induced even to speak of her husband. Even then, when she was beginning thoroughly to appreciate Venetia's worth and discretion, her native loyalty forbade her from saying more than was absolutely necessary about Jim, lest she should injure him in this good young lady's opinion, and make it more difficult for him to return to that place in honest life from which Mercy

fondly hoped that he had only banished himself for a while.

This daughter of the people, in the dignity and courage of her silence about the miserable behaviour which had well-nigh crushed her, was no mean example to many a high-born dame.

Venetia Armfield, from the peculiarity of her drudging life, had no companions of her own age and class, and whenever she could manage to get away from the many domestic duties which usually held her captive in Cobbold Place, she would run round to Mercy's for a chat, while the little housewife ironed, always receiving a kindly smile and nod from Job, who thanked her for bringing a stray gleam or two of sunshine into his desolate darling's life. It is hard to say it, but perhaps Venetia's affection for Mercy, at all events in its earlier stage, had just a substratum of selfishness; for if Mercy would not talk of Jim, except in such short sentences that they almost amounted to monosyllables, she was almost prolix on the subject of Guiseppe Belsospiro. She never seemed to be tired of dilating on his goodness, his



generosity, his beautiful singing. She even went so far as to express herself in terms of admiration about the beauty of his person. Nor was Mercy's high praise of Guiseppe altogether because she saw that Venetia loved to hear it. The Sennoor, in Mercy's estimation, was a very great man; in her limited sphere she had never seen a greater, and she set him up on a very high pinnacle, and worshipped him as if he were a sort of demi-god. Hence the commencement of the bond of union, which each day grew stronger between these two, and many were the pleasant hours they passed together talking over Guiseppe's merits, and of the time when Venetia should be his wife, and accompany him to that sunny land of which he had told her so often. For Venetia, although Mrs Armfield had as yet heard nothing of it, and Basil frowned on it from the very summit of his disapproval, always now looked forward to her marriage with Guiseppe as an event which would take place some day in a happy future, and it was an intense delight to her to have found a sympathetic spirit like Mercy, who was never tired of discoursing on the Sennoor's attributes.

They were sitting together one hot sunny afternoon, about five o'clock. Mercy had just persuaded Miss Armfield to have a cup of tea, and they were talking in the confidential strain in which women love to indulge, on the merits of the Sennoor of course, when the little man himself knocked at the door, and half opening it, asked Mercy if she would take him up a jug of hot water. He was quite aware that Venetia, by his introduction, was a frequent visitor in Smith Street; but he scarcely expected to see her there at that moment, and was a little taken aback when he perceived her. He came forward, however, at once, and gave her an affectionate greeting—the surprise was evidently no unwelcome one, and Mercy, pressing hospitality upon him with a warmth but rarely testified within the pale of good society, invited him forthwith to sit down and have a cup of tea.

Guiseppe was nothing loth. He had learnt to drink gratefully what he was pleased to call 'l'alcool Anglais,' since he had been domiciled in the country, besides, even if the beverage had been distasteful to him, the fair Venetia's presence would have converted it

into nectar. So he sat down on the chair Mercy gave him, and looked round with a delighted expression on his fat, beaming face. It was the only time he had ever been across Mercy's parlour, except when he had drunk her health at the wedding breakfast, and the permission she had now given him to come in and make himself at home evidently pleased him.

He chatted away glibly to Venetia in his mingled Italian, French, and English lingo, which was utterly unintelligible to Mercy. She never could understand the Sennoor, except an occasional short sentence when he asked for what he wanted. She was rather glad of it now, since she fancied the lovers would thus have all the liberty of expressing their sentiments without a witness. She busied herself about the tea-making, and scorched her face till it was the colour of a peony over the toasting of several rounds of bread, which she buttered carefully with the saltiest of butter.

All this while Job was plying his needle in the shop, and thither Mercy, as she often

did, proceeded to carry him his strong dark-coloured Bohea, and the thickest round in the plate of toast.

She set it all ready on the table for a second, while, cup in hand, she proceeded to open the door of communication between the two rooms, when—she uttered a loud scream, dropped the cup of scalding tea all over her dress and feet, and would herself have fallen to the ground if Guiseppe had not with much promptness caught her in his arms.

A man strode across the front room and stood for a second looking at them. It was Jim. He had been talking to Job for some little time, receiving from him pretty severe reprimands for his past bad conduct; but, owing to the conversation going on between the lovers, Mercy had not heard the voices as she inevitably would have done, had she been alone. Jim stared at her for a minute as, supported by Signor Belsospiro's arm, she was making a mighty effort to retain her consciousness, and then he uttered such a fearful oath that Venetia, who was standing look-

ing on in surprised wonder, turned white with terror.

Yet Jim was perfectly sober, and had come there with the intention of pleading, not quarrelling. He wanted to win Mercy back to begin life with him anew, and he had come to Smith Street with the intention of making every promise for the future, trying by every possible means to obliterate all unpleasant recollections from the past. The sight of his wife, supported by Guiseppe Belsospiro's arm, had instantly chased away every good intention. Jim had always, though quite groundlessly, felt inclined to be jealous of the Sennoor ; now he thought his suspicions were perfectly justifiable, and in the coarsest, most insolent tones, he asked the astonished Italian what right he had to be philandering after and making love to an honest man's wife.

Mercy struggled herself free of Guiseppe when she heard this address, and stood leaning against the wall, while with gasping utterance she tried to defend the Italian.

'It's not true, Jim, it's not true. He never has—'

But a determined 'Silence, woman!' stopped her sentence in mid-utterance, and then followed another volley of oaths and vile epithets hurled against Guiseppe. Fortunately the little signor did not understand the half of them, or probably his hot southern blood would have resented them in a way for which Jim was little prepared. As it was, he, too, began an abusive tirade in Italian, but as no one understood it but Venetia, it did not much matter what he said, only his highly demonstrative tone and gesture added in no small degree to the clamour, which was becoming almost intolerable, since Job had also begun to lay down the law, and request Jim Burritt to leave his house and not insult his lodgers, or he should feel under the necessity of sending for the police. In fact, they all three talked at once, and neither paid the slightest attention to the other, Venetia and Mercy both occasionally putting in an imploring request that such a disgraceful altercation might be stopped, but without the slightest avail. It was not till Venetia gave a little scream of fright, when the quarrel rose to

an almost unbearable pitch, that Guiseppe, so carried away was he by his anger, paid the very slightest attention even to *her* appeals, then he murmured,—

‘Poverina—carissima. This is for the systime of the nerves of a lady no fitting scene.’

‘No, no,’ she cried, glad of any excuse to get him away. ‘Do come, Signor Guiseppe, take me away out of here, for pity’s sake.’

Silenced by her fear, she led him to the door, but, once in the passage, Venetia stopped and bade him go to his own rooms while she returned to Mercy. She was too loyal to desert her friend, and her seeming desire to depart was merely a ruse to get Guiseppe away. For a moment or two a minor altercation went on between them in the passage, for neither felt at all disposed to allow the other to return to the scene of the fray. It was stopped, however, by Job, who came to the door and told them with much politeness that ‘the scene was not fit for gentlefolks such as they, and that, if left to himself, he thought he could succeed in

mastering Jim, and restoring the house to its usual state of peace and quiet.' Guiseppe, on hearing this, proposed to escort Miss Armitage home, and Job returned to the parlour, where the querulous and over-excited Jim was every moment losing more and more ground with Mercy, who still stood trembling against the wall, feeling that to be compelled to go home and be at the disposition of this terrible man was about the greatest calamity that could befall her in life. Yet, how well she had loved him once, would have loved him still, had he not himself slain the tender feeling even as she sought to foster it!

Job watched them for a second or two after he had shut the door, meantime he was collecting his ideas, making his plan for war or peace. He decided on the latter if possible. Job was one of those men who, however angry, had always perfect control over his feelings. He was determined to exercise it now. He went up to Jim and spoke to him very quietly.

'You are labouring under an egregious mistake' (Job, be it remembered, was fond of long words), 'there is no love-making, nor



nothing akin to it, between Mercy and the Sennoor. That's the Sennoor's young lady as was there with him just now. And it's not at all befitting to a man like you, Jim, to be making a brawl in an honest house.'

'I don't want to make no brawl, but I wants my rights, that's all, and I haven't got 'em.'

'Exactly—you wants your rights—but, mind ye, it's give and take as justly governs this yere world. You haven't given the lass hers, and so you forfeit yours.'

'I won't have no reasonin',' said Jim doggedly. 'Is my wife a-coming home along o' me, or bean't she?—that's the length of it.'

'I should say not at present,' answered Job as pleasantly as if disputing was quite out of the question. 'Things don't seem quite comfortable-like for Mercy just at the moment. She had best bide here till after the event, and then when you have pulled yourself together a bit, and squared up the business, she can perhaps come and bring the youngster to cheer you up.'

Perhaps Job hoped that the young man would have drunk himself into his grave

before then ; he did not show it, however, but talked as though in all good faith.

Jim seemed a little surprised, for he dropped all his swagger and irritation of tone, as he said very simply,—

‘You’d best let her come now. I want her.’

‘In a few months ; not now. I’m sure it’s best.’

‘What do you say, Mercy?’ asked Jim, turning to her.

‘Oh, Jim, you’ve been very cruel to me,’ she sobbed as the large tears came into her eyes.

Any allusion to his own shortcomings always served to exasperate Jim, and he turned on Mercy savagely, doubling up his fist.

‘Cruel, have I? I’ll teach you what cruelty is afore I’ve done with you, you minx.’

Job caught him by the arms before he had time to resist thrust him into the shop, and locking the communicating door, put the key in his pocket.

‘None of this,’ he said determinedly. ‘I won’t have the lass threatened in my

house. Look you here, Jim, we'd best settle this business without her.'

'We won't settle nothing without her, for I ain't a-going to stir unless she comes too.'

'Nonsense, nonsense, my good lad, you must be reasonable. You can't suppose that I, who am Mercy's father as it were, shall let you take her away to starve and kick her—come—come—no restiveness—that's what it is in plain English,' for Jim showed signs of kicking under the accusation.

'You leave her here where she'll be taken care of, and if you mend your ways I don't say but she'll come back to you in time. If you attempt to take her now, I shall consider myself forced to go to the magistrate and have you bound over to keep the peace.'

Jim gave a sort of savage howl. Job, however, took no notice but went on quietly.

'Whereas, if you leave the lass here with me, I don't say as you shall never see her. Suppose we says once a week o' Sundays, and every Sunday as you comes here without being the worse for liquor you shall have five shillings to help out the week's pay.'

Job thoroughly knew Jim Burritt's love for money, and he concluded rightly that this promise, joined to his former threat, would have the effect he desired.

Job loved Mercy so well that he felt he would work a few hours longer in the week with pleasure to make the five shillings, if thereby he could save her from the visits of a drunken beast.

Job was keenly alive to the divine law that those whom God has joined together no man shall put asunder, and he did not think he had the right, infamous though Jim's behaviour had been, entirely to separate him from his wife; so he devised this plan which appeared likely to be a successful one, for Jim seemed more than half-inclined to accept.

After all what was he to do with Mercy if she consented to go with him, the business at the tobacconist's which, in active hands, might have proved a paying one, in Jim's had never even had any life to speak of, and probably by this time was utterly and hopelessly dead. He was getting frightfully hard up for money, notwithstanding his uncle's

legacy. Perhaps he had a sort of flickering idea that if he went and claimed Mercy and bullied the tailor, that same little man would give him a berth in Smith Street.

Since the stormy interview that had taken place, he concluded, however, that a life of constant reprimand and coercion would scarcely be a pleasant one—better to take five shillings a-week and freedom, at all events till this cursed child-story had come to some sort of termination.

So after a few minutes more of haggling Jim gave in, and the matter was settled tolerably amicably considering the high pressure from which every one was suffering. Job unlocked the door and Jim was admitted once more to Mercy's presence, and offered a cup of the now cold tea from which Miss Armitage and Guiseppe had been so ruthlessly hunted.

It was not a very pleasant interview, however. Mercy had heard all that had taken place, and she did not attempt to press him to stay, or evince the slightest desire to accompany him.

It seemed very much as if Mercy had

grown afraid of Jim—Jim, whom she used to love with such devotion.

Ay, she did love him still, for when he at last rose to go away, she threw her arms about his neck and begged him to try and walk firmly in the straight path, and keep from drink and evil ways for her sake.





## CHAPTER VI.

### BOLTED.



APTAIN DENIS drove from Queen's Gate back to his lodgings in St James' Place as fast as the promise of a double fare would take him. He let himself in with a latch-key, and immediately heard a good deal of angry talking in the hall.

Jim's voice in altercation with the mistress of the house, and what is very evident too, the man is more than half drunk. What he may have said or done in such a mood troubles Denis not a little, and since his affairs will scarcely bear discussion with his landlady, he at once requests Burritt to accompany him up to his own room as he wishes to speak to him.

‘He was that troublesome, sir. I didn’t know what to do with him. You see there’s other people in the house as must be considered, and I can’t have a disgraceful noise, so I made so bold as to look in the glass in your room to see where you was dining to-night, and thought I had better send after you, as he wouldn’t go without seeing you.’

‘Quite right, Mrs Shears, quite right,’ but Denis made a mental note that he would not leave his invitations in his looking-glass in the future, and then, in an angry tone, he bade Jim Burritt follow him upstairs quickly.

The expression of Denis’ face is by no means an amiable one when he receives the young carpenter, into whose toils he has cast himself, while Jim’s half drunken accents are of the most querulous.

It is some weeks now since he has seen or received any money from Captain Denis, and his present appearance in St James’ has evidently the most bullying intentions.

He has drunk away the whole of the five shillings given him a few hours before,



and he begins to talk at the top of his voice, threatening Denis with blowing on the whole concern, and going off straight to the police, if his just claims are not instantly satisfied.

Denis, at first inclined to be angry and treat Jim to a little of his own strong language, speedily finds that unless he wishes to raise such a disturbance as shall arouse the whole house, he must be plausible and conciliatory. So he tries to persuade his 'good friend Jim,' hatred and wrath against him meanwhile surging wildly in his heart, 'for his own sake to wait just a day or two longer, when he expects a very large sum of money, which, he assures him on his word of honour, he has every intention of sharing honestly with him.'

Jim bursts into a guffawish laugh. He does not believe for a moment in Denis' honesty; in a sober hour he would have told him so straight off; in his present maudlin condition, the idea of it amuses him vastly, and seems, for a time at all events, to vanquish all his irritability of temper.

So far Denis has succeeded. If he can

only get Jim into a good humour, he thinks he knows a plan by which he may silence him. In the first place he produces a bottle more than three parts filled with brandy, and observes with satisfaction Jim's eyes twinkle as he looks at it.

He does not require much pressing to drink off two or three glasses of the fiery liquid; growing conversational after the second glass, and letting Denis know, to his no small surprise, that he had parted from his wife, and was living at Brixton in the very same house with Mrs Ford.

The intelligence was by no means pleasing to Denis, who would gladly have separated Jim from the whole affair, since from the state in which he now found him it was very evident that he was in no wise to be trusted. The next piece of intelligence that Jim vouchsafed proved, however, very satisfactory to Captain Denis, since it informed him that neither he nor the 'missus,' as he called Mrs Ford, need bother themselves long about the brat of a boy, since it was very clear that he was booked for another world.

This was the first that Denis had heard about Dandy's illness, nor save under the influence of brandy would Jim have told him now. He and Mrs Ford had decided that it was wisest to get as much 'swag' as they possibly could out of the 'captain' before the child died, as they both thoroughly believed that it soon would.

Denis did not, however, appear in the least agitated or impressed by what he heard, he only rang the bell, and on the servant of the house coming up stairs, desired her to go and fetch him a bottle of brandy, as his friend Mr Burritt was very ill.

The brandy once arrived, Denis did not touch it; he had had a good deal of wine at dinner, and he wanted to keep his senses as clear as possible. Jim, however, was not long in emptying the entire contents of the bottle, which, added to what he had previously taken, had the effect of rendering him hopelessly and imbecilely drunk. He clung to Denis with a sort of childish confiding pertinacity, the liquor having put him into exactly the state which his unworthy patron the most desired; but he had not

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the slightest intention of keeping him there. He rang once more for the slavey of the establishment, and sent her for a cab, saying he would see his friend home, as he did not seem exactly capable of taking care of himself. With little difficulty, in Jim's present mood, he persuaded him to allow him to help him down stairs, and in less than five minutes, triumph on the black captain's brow, they were driving in a four-wheel cab at a brisk pace towards Mrs Ford's temporary lodgings at Brixton. By the time they reached there, however, a heavy stupor came over Jim, resembling that in which he had lain for hours when Mercy found him in Ben Haller's beer shop, and it was with some difficulty that Denis, assisted by the cabman, succeeded in getting him into the house, where Mrs Ford, who had already retired for the night, put her head out of the window, in a highly befrilled night-cap, to learn what was going on.

Captain Denis told her rather sharply to come out and not stand gaping there, for Burritt was taken ill and wanted nursing

and attention. Between them they dragged him on to a sofa in the front parlour, and Denis discharged the cabman with a tip of half-a-sovereign, which caused a suspicion in cabby's obtuse brain that all was not quite on the square. He turned the gold piece over in his hand as he looked at it by the light of a neighbouring lamp-post, and came to the conclusion that 'folk didn't pay so much above the fare unless there was summat to hide.'

Denis had for once erred by being over-generous, and had raised the ghost of a crime in cabby's mind when he had only seen a drunken man. He took careful note of the house and address, then drove to the corner of the road, where he waited for some time to see if 'the gentl'-man' came out; but as no one appeared, he finally drove off in search of another fare.

Meantime Denis and Mrs Ford stand looking at Jim by the dim light of a tallow candle, which Mrs Ford holds dripping.

'He ain't ill,' she says after a while; 'he's

drunk or I ain't a judge, and, Lor' bless ye, I oughter be, I've seen many of them. Ford was drunk most days.'

'Shocking vice,' ejaculated the moral captain feelingly.

'Beastly, ain't it?' she replied; 'I don't mind a drop o' liquor myself, but to be like that,—ugh! But however did you come across Jim, captain? Was he drinking along o' you? He said as he was going to see you. I've never know'd him as bad as that afore, only a bit squiffy like.'

'I found him in the street,' answered Denis very glibly; 'I suppose he was coming to me, but was overcome by liquor and sat down on the pavement—lucky I passed instead of a policeman.'

'And whatever made you bring him here?'

'I did not know where he lived, and it occurred to me that you would do him the friendly turn of looking after him.'

'Then you didn't know as he was bidding here?'

'Living here? How fortunate that I should have thought of coming to you.'

‘Humph!’ grunted Mrs Ford.

She was one of those people who did not believe in Captain Denis, although circumstances had made them partners in evil. She always suspected that he was trying to do her—she thought so now—and he probably noted the misgiving which was creeping about her mind, for he turned the conversation by asking after the child.

Mrs Ford shook her head.

‘He’s just slipping gradually and surely out of the world,’ she said; ‘poor little lamb—my heart aches for him. I’m sorry I ever had anything to do with the housing of him.’

‘Nonsense, Mrs Ford, why, you have the opportunity of acting a mother’s part to a poor, motherless orphan, who is only kept out of the way till some law litigation about his property is over. When he comes into it, as he eventually will, think how he will reward you—much more generously than I, his heavily shackled guardian, can do.’

‘He’ll never come into no property,’ she

asserted ; 'he's dying, I tell you. And as for his having no mother—he's mammy-sick, and it's only the sight of his mammy as could save him. If I knewed where she lived I'd take him to her. Would you like to see him—he's asleep, but you'll see for yourself that there ain't much of him but skin and bone.'

Denis followed her into the back-room. Dandy, he was quite aware, would know him instantly, but since she had assured him he was asleep, he thought it would perhaps be just as wise to judge of the child's condition for himself.

He was lying on his back on the little bed which had been arranged for him near Mrs Ford's larger one, and as she held the tallow candle above his head, Denis started back involuntarily.

Since the day he had been stolen from his nurse in the Park, Captain Denis had not set eyes on Lady George's pretty boy, and to say that he was shocked by his appearance now, would be depreciating the sentiment of utter surprise with which he regarded him.



If he had craved a torturing revenge on Lady George for the cold antipathy to which he considered she had always treated him, it lay before him now as he saw her darling boy, the idol of her life, bereft of every attribute which makes childhood beautiful. Could it be possible that this haggard skeleton was Lady George's bright little Dandy?

For a second, as Mrs Ford put the light closer to him, he opened his eyes,—they were clear and brilliant as ever; but round them were the dark, black circles which are sure symptoms of sickness or care. He moved restlessly for a second, gave one of his usual sad little sobs, said something about 'mammy,' as though he had been dreaming of his happy home, and turned on his side.

Denis, when the diabolical idea had occurred to him of kidnapping Lady George Heriot's boy, had had no intention of causing the child's death, or indeed of injuring him in any way. He was mad with rage at Lady George's coldness, mad with jealousy of Basil Armfield, who, he firmly believed, had gained

her willing ear. The idea had occurred to him that if he could hide the child for a while, throw the blame on Basil, and thus alienate him from her ladyship's good graces, he would then get all the *κudos* of finding the boy, and receive the mother's hand and fortune for his pains. Events had, however, not turned out to suit Captain Denis' good pleasure. Basil was more of a favourite than he had ever been before, and Lady George's hatred for himself had increased rather than diminished.

If their last interview had never taken place perhaps he might have relented, and now at the eleventh hour have sent her back her child; but, even as he stood and looked at Dandy's emaciated form, her chilling words rose to his mind, and he resolved with brutal determination to be relentless to the end.

'If Dandy dies!' he thought for a second, —then he turned away from the little bed and walked on to the front room; 'if he dies —well, all trace of him will be lost, no one knows who he is but Jim, and Jim'—

Captain Denis cast a glance on Jim's

inanimate form as he lay breathing heavily on the sofa, then a smile passed over his face for a second, as though he thought there was not much to be dreaded from him.

He did not, however, wish Mrs Ford to guess his thoughts. He gave her a couple of sovereigns.

‘You must look after the child,’ he said ; ‘but I need not recommend him to you, for I know you will not neglect him. Now let me advise you to go to bed. I’ll smoke a cigar or two here in this arm-chair, in case there should be any trouble about Burritt. If I find he is pretty quiet and likely to sleep, I’ll go out towards morning back to my own quarters. If you have any communication to make about the child, address it to John Dent at Ben Haller’s.’

Mrs Ford raised several objections to the ‘captin sitting up to watch a fellow like Jim,’ but he overruled them all, and in less than a quarter of an hour she was snoring vigorously in the inner room, and Denis was smoking as complacently

as though the very atmosphere he breathed was not rife with crimes which might at any moment hurry him to destruction.

About three o'clock in the morning he let himself out on tip-toe from the Brixton villa, and in the balmy dawn of awakening day proceeded to walk leisurely into town. Perhaps he thought sleep would prove itself, even if he courted it, no very willing guest, and so preferred this mode of dawdling away the silent hours, or was it for the more prosaic reason that he could not get a cab at that hour of the morning that he decided to walk.

Whatever the cause, it was five o'clock before he reached St James' Street and went to bed. No one in the house heeded Captain Denis' hours, nor in fact those of any of the aristocratic men lodgers, to whom all the rooms were let, many of whom were in the habit of coming in at all periods of the night. and sleeping till the middle of the day.

It was mid-day when Captain Denis woke, his long walk having produced the exhaustion for which he craved. He got up,

dressed himself somewhat hastily, and went out. Breakfast at the club would have been his first object, it will be imagined ; but no, he directed his steps to St Giles'.

Ben Haller was standing on the steps of the 'Pot and Kettle'—business in his establishment was what he termed 'slack' at that hour.

'Mornin', Mr Dent,' he said, as Denis came up, 'haven't seen nothing of Burritt since you were here yesterday ; but here's a letter for you marked "Immediate,"' went on the landlord, turning into the house to look for it, 'though, as I s'pose you're one of them folks as lives nowhere, I couldn't forward it.'

'When did it come?'

'This very mornin', as ever is. Queer as you should come to-day, and sometimes you doesn't show your face here for weeks.'

Denis tore open the envelope, Ben Haller chuckling the while over his own facetiousness, since he fully believed that Mr Dent had come there solely and entirely for that letter.

He gave a little exclamation when he had read it—whether in real or feigned surprise Mr Haller could not determine.

‘You knew Burritt drank, of course?’ he said, looking up at the landlord.

‘Well—yes. I should think I did rather—seen him drunk pretty often of late.’

‘He is dead!’

‘Dead! Good God! you don’t say so? How and when did he die?’

‘This morning he was found dead about nine o’clock.’

‘Well, I never heard nothing so queer.’

‘Queer, Mr Haller. I should call it awful.’

‘I came here expecting a letter from him on some little matter he was going to attend to for me, and instead I get this communication from his landlady.’

‘And his cherub - faced wife?’ asked Haller.

‘I do not know anything about his wife. I only had business relations with him.’

‘But what’s killed him?’ asked the landlord.

‘Drink. It seems he was taken home

drunk last night, put to bed, and found dead this morning.'

'Tain't often as they dies off like that; but Jim was a weakly chap. I s'pose there'll be a 'quest?'

Captain Denis gave an almost imperceptible wince at the word.

'Yes. I should imagine so.'

'You look a bit queerish, Mr Dent. Have a glass of sperrit?'

Denis dared not refuse, and muttering something about hearing of the sudden death of this man having upset his nerves, tossed off a glass of fiery alcohol.

Very soon after he took his departure, without telling Ben Haller that the death had taken place at Brixton, and when the burly landlord, an hour later, went round to the tobacconist's shop to condole with Mercy and learn particulars, he was not a little surprised to find the door locked and 'To Let' in large letters on the closed shutters. His curiosity was balked, and if he could only find that Dent he'd let him know what he thought of him for only telling half a story.

‘That Dent,’ however, scarcely gave himself time to eat the breakfast of which he stood so much in need, before he threw a few articles of wearing apparel pell-mell into a portmanteau, and prepared to make a start for the continent.

The events of the last few hours had almost made Henry Denis forget that state bordering on madness in which he had left Lady George Heriot.







## CHAPTER VII.

### THE INQUEST.



HE coroner and his attendant satellites have viewed Jim Burritt's lifeless body as it lies in a small back-room in Mrs Ford's lodgings, to which it had been moved from the sofa where she found him dead, when she came to see after him in the morning. They had returned to sit in solemn conclave at a neighbouring public-house, and in the minds of every one assembled, that there were mysterious circumstances in connection with this death, there was little doubt.

Lingering about the door of the Merton Arms were the numerous witnesses who were to be summoned in reference to Jim's untimely death.

The first who was called was Job Jennett, but he could prove nothing beyond his identity and his usually drunken habits, and that he left his house, to all appearance in good health, about six o'clock on the evening before his death.

Poor old Job had been terribly overcome at seeing Mercy's husband lying dead, and he could not restrain his tears, even through the coroner's interrogatory. He did not love the man ; had never cared for the marriage ; would perhaps rejoice in a day or two that she was free ; but in the meantime he could not help feeling shocked at and overcome by the early and untoward fate of this once clever and bright young workman. Mrs Ford was the next witness. She looked frightened out of her life, assuming rather than actually feeling the greatest trepidation. She had not the slightest intention of speaking the truth, and she justly imagined that any hesitation on her part as to what she should say next would be the more ably concealed under the garb of abject fear. She looked round the room with well acted terror when she saw the assembled jury, and

clutched hold of the table as though without support she must fall, but a few sharp words from the coroner soon made her recover her legs, though she stood shaking as if the slightest thing would upset her altogether.

‘Now, my good woman, give us in as few words as possible the particulars of how this James Burritt came to your house, and what happened afterwards; in fact, tell us all you know.’

‘He was a-livin’ there, yer worship—that is, a-lodgin’ in the same place. He’d had a bit of a quarrel with his wife ye see, cause of the drink. She didn’t—’

‘Yes, yes. He came home you say. Was he alone?’

‘Lord love ye, sir, he never bringed no one with him.’

‘That is not answering my question directly. Was he alone?’

Mrs Ford looked in trembling hesitancy for a second or two, then she said,—

‘Yees, sir.’

The lie was worth the tip she should get from Denis, she thought.

‘He was alone, you say?’

‘Yes, sir. He gave a tap agen the window with a stone or a stick or something, and I went to the door and I letted him in myself,’ she was growing more prolix as she thought her statement was being believed.

‘You let him in. In what state was he, pray?’

‘Well, your worship, he weren’t sober.’

‘He could walk, I presume?’

‘He just managed to drag hisself to the sofa, and then he lied down.’

‘Do you know where he had been?’

‘No, sir. He wasn’t particular free about his affairs, wasn’t Jim.’

‘Did you give him anything when he came in?’

‘I hadn’t nowt to give him.’

‘What did you do, then?’

‘Well, I just stood and looked at him for a bit, and then I crept back to my bed. I had gotten up to let him in. He seemed to be sleeping very comfortable and heavy.’

‘And it never occurred to you to call in a doctor?’

‘A doctor to a drunken man! Lord love

your worship, I should as soon have thought of sending for the parson.'

On the face of more than one juryman there was a strong inclination to smile, the sternness of the coroner's tone, however, repressed it as he said,—

'Do you know, Mrs Ford, that you were incurring an immense responsibility by neglecting to take this step?'

Mrs Ford began to snivel.

'How could I know, your honour, as such a dreadful thing was going to happen poor Jim. I wouldn't have had this yere thing happen if I could a helped it, not for all the gold of Californy; but send for a doctor to a drunken man—no I never!'

'Then this is all you have to tell us, Mrs Ford?'

'Yes, your worship, and all the tellin' won't bring the dead back to life, worse luck to it.'

'You can go down.'

No one doubted Mrs Ford's veracity, and the next witness called was the medical man she had sent for in hot haste, when she found Jim dead on the sofa on the follow-

ing morning. He threw very little fresh light on the subject, beyond testifying that Jim had been dead some hours when he arrived, and that he gave it as his opinion that his death was due to excessive drinking.

There seemed nothing left to do but to return a verdict in accordance with this opinion, and to let old Job take upon himself the burying of poor Mercy's husband, as he appeared willing to do. The room was ordered to be cleared, and the verdict was about to be taken into consideration, when some hustling and bustling was heard among the crowd assembled on the staircase. A policeman, who had been employed in collecting evidence, came in with another witness.

He was a burly-looking man with a round honest face, and he wore a badge, No. 110,876, round his neck. He pressed forward to the table with some determination, and seemed anxious to tell his tale. After the usual preliminaries had been gone through, and he had given his name as Michael Davis, he stated that he was the

cabman who had driven the deceased James Burritt to Brixton on the night he died, and had helped the genl'man to carry him into the house. A murmur of astonishment and disapprobation circulated through the room at this announcement, stopped, however, at once by the presiding genius, who asked who the gentleman was to whom he alluded.

This, however, Michael Davis did not know, he could only give the number and name of the street where he had picked up his fare, and assert that the deceased could not walk without support when he got into the cab, and was perfectly incapable of assisting himself in any way when he was lifted out of it.

Nothing in Michael Davis' evidence in any way proved the existence of foul play, save that it gave the lie direct to everything that Mrs Ford had just asserted, thereby leaving an impression on the minds of all present that she must have had some all-potent reason for thus perjuring herself.

She was recalled in order to be submitted to a very stiff cross-examination, but she had

already left the 'Merton Arms,' and returned to her little niece Dolly, as the child was called at Brixton, who was more than usually ailing and fretful that morning, making Mrs Ford excessively solicitous and anxious. If there should be another death, it might not be so easy to escape detection, she thought.

Finding that Mrs Ford was gone, it was decided that the inquest should be adjourned till the following Monday morning, in order that the police might make inquiries about the owner of the house from which Michael Davis said he had taken up his fare. Of course the house was found to have many occupants; thus the only course to pursue was to cross-examine the landlord and servants, when it was speedily ascertained that Captain Denis was the individual for whom they were in search.

But he was not there—had not been there for several days—was gone abroad, they believed, on important business in connection with a letter he had received from a firm in Paris.

'They did not know his address in the French capital?'



‘No. Very few letters for him ever came there ; they usually went to the club round the corner.’

Thither the officer of the law betook himself, but with no better result. They knew nothing whatever about Captain Denis, save that he had not been seen for several days, and that the letters which had arrived for him were lying there awaiting his orders.

The following Monday morning the inquest was resumed, but Captain Denis, who was to be called as a witness, had not been heard of.

Mrs Ford, meanwhile, narrowly escaped apprehension, and was only let off with a severe reprimand from the coroner, who rather took the view that the woman, at large, under the strict surveillance of the police, was more likely to assist the ends of justice than if shut up in a cell. It was not, moreover, supposed that she had taken any active part concerning Jim, except in seeking to shield this Denis, who probably for some reason did not wish it to be known that he had visited her house

that night, and for the discovery of whose whereabouts the police were all on the look-out, in order that he might give his testimony at the inquest, which was again adjourned.

The French police were communicated with ; and Mr Green, receiving a sharp spur from this fresh case which had started into being against Denis, devoted himself energetically to the discovery of his track. But make what inquiries he would, he could find no trace of him beyond Dover. He obtained positive proof of his arrival in that town, but none whatever of his having crossed the Channel ; not but what it was perfectly possible that he might have done so unobserved, but Mr Green's private opinion was that he was still in Dover, and in Dover he meant to wait and watch for him. The name was legion of the police force who were on the look-out for him in Paris ; whereas he was the only representative of that august body who elected to remain passively in home-quarters.

Several days passed. No news came of Denis. Mrs Ford watched Dandy with

solicitous care. She had grown very fond of the child, whose young life was, to all appearance, ebbing slowly away before her eyes, and she felt a sorrow for him which she had never felt in the earlier part of his sojourn with her, when she heard him occasionally give utterance to piteous appeals for his mammy. If she had not been afraid of Denis stopping the supplies, and the difficulties she might herself get into for having detained the child, she would herself have tried to find that mammy he so craved.

Be it remembered, Mrs Ford did not know whose child little Dandy really was ; no one knew among those connected with Jim Burritt and Captain Denis, save Mercy, and she had kept the secret faithfully for her husband's sake.

Mercy, accompanied by old Job, had come to the house in tearful misery, in order to see her husband's body, but Mrs Ford had kept carefully out of the young widow's way, and Mercy had not the least idea that the little niece Job had told her was living under Mrs Ford's care at Brixton was poor Dandy. Mrs Ford was under

the impression that her quarters, now all these people knew of her whereabouts, were growing uncomfortably hot, but she was quite aware that the police were not losing sight of her, and that any attempt to move on her part might be attended with dangerous consequences. Every day she expected to receive fresh orders from Captain Denis, who, she felt sure, must know what was going on.

Though he might have some little trouble in clearing himself from any implication in this sudden death of Jim Burritt, yet she did not fancy he had seriously anything to do with it. In fact, Mrs Ford was a little bit afraid that she had herself got Denis into trouble, by trying to shield him by a perhaps unnecessary lie.

Altogether, she determined to remain very quiet, see as few people as possible, and in every way escape all the notice she could.

They had buried Jim, and the talk, which had been rife enough all about the neighbourhood, had somewhat subsided. Still the missing witness, Denis, had not come forward, and Mrs Ford's supplies were getting

very short. She was already in arrears with her rent, and the landlady, who had looked shyly at her since this death had taken place in the house, was growing clamorous.

Dandy was lying on the bed, propped up, playing with some broken toys, and every now and then remaining very still for a few moments, as though the exertion were too much for him. The old woman was sitting in an arm-chair, her hands in her lap, almost as still as the child. She was troubled in mind and could not see her way clearly through the mists which surrounded her. Suddenly the door was thrust open, and Susan walked into the room. She did not often pay her mother a visit, being too much taken up with her own affairs, but her appearance just now was very welcome to Mrs Ford, who was non-plussed, and who had rather a belief in Susan's cleverness when an emergency was imminent, as Mrs Ford conjectured was the case now.

Susan threw herself down on the bed beside Dandy.

'Well, you do look ill, child!' she said, as she cast a momentary glance at him, then she turned to her mother and observed,—

‘Here’s a pretty set out ; who ever thought things were coming to such a strait as this ?’

Mrs Ford looked a little bewildered. She had seen Susan more than once since Jim’s death. She did not therefore suppose it was to that melancholy fact she was alluding.

Her mother’s perplexity seemed to amuse Susan—mischief always did. She went on, without vouchsafing any explanation of what had occurred.

‘Whatever we’d best do now I don’t know. You have put your foot in it pretty considerable, I should say ; eh, mother ?’

‘What do you mean, Susan ? Has any one else died ?’

‘Lor’ bless ye no ; there’s no more deaths, but I shouldn’t wonder if there was a hanging or two in prospect, yours as likely as not.’

Mrs Ford started up with a scream.

‘Good God ! girl, what are you saying—me ! Oh, I knew some awful thing was going to happen.’

Susan began to laugh ; she was very heartless, but she would scarcely have laughed had she really thought her mother to be in

danger, but the state of agonising fright into which her words had plunged her not very courageous parent amused her excessively.

‘I wish I’d never had anything to do with this business,’ went on Mrs Ford. ‘It was all along of you that I got myself into it, and you ought to help me out.’

‘Well, it’s difficult to stop running when it’s downhill at every step, but we’ll try.’ You haven’t got a bit of compassion for me though, and him in all that trouble.’

‘I don’t know who you mean by him, but whoever it is, you don’t seem much upset about the spirits.’

‘Well, you see, he’s shied at me a bit lately, and not been quite so manageable as I could have hoped, so the loss ain’t so great.’

‘Whoever are you talking about?’

‘Why, Denis of course,—don’t you know?’

‘Know what?’

‘That he’s been taken up, spotted at Dover, for the murder of Jim Burritt. I don’t believe as he ever did it, though he’s a shady party too; but whatever was he hiding for?’

Mrs Ford was too overcome to speak for several minutes. She sat down once again and stared at Susan—at last she muttered,—

‘Locked up—him? Whatever shall I do?’







## CHAPTER VIII.

### TO THE BITTER END.

**H**ENRY DENIS arrested, and on the suspicion of having committed so foul a crime as murder!

The panic that this piece of intelligence has cast into the camp of the Heriots is unparalleled in their family annals. Captain Denis does not bear their name, it is true, but to be related even distantly to a man who is to be arraigned before his country's tribunal on such a charge is a horrible degradation, from which the Heriots turn away with so decided a gesture of horror, that it almost stamps him guilty.

Who is this low man, this James Burritt? they ask each other over and over again in wondering tones, the Marchioness of Craigie-

toun clamouring the loudest and the most violently against Denis, from the very fact that she had liked him the best.

Lady George, though she had recovered somewhat just sufficiently to recognise those about her, and occasionally to utter some short sentence, yet rarely spoke and never alluded to any of the graver issues of life that were developing themselves around her. The doctor said she would gradually recover her former tone of thought, but in the meantime she did not seem capable of understanding what had happened, and no one told her of Captain Denis' detention. Had they done so, perhaps the knowledge would have assisted her cure, and removed some of the mists which hung loweringly between her and Basil, whose dejected mien quite infected all those who came in contact with him. The happiness of his whole future life lay in the chance of restoring Dandy to his mother alive and well, and he was almost losing the hope of finding any trace of the boy, save his grave. Basil knew full well that this being so, the doting mother would

refuse to be comforted, nor perhaps linger long on earth after the darling she had lost.

They were indeed terrible moments for all concerned ; shame, horror, perplexity, dread, followed each other in rapid and fitful succession, and of all those who knew aught of the details of the case, Guiseppe Belsospiro alone made no secret of his satisfaction. He rejoiced for Mercy's sake that she was free ; he rejoiced for his own that Denis was at last entrapped in one of the many snares he had set for himself, and Guiseppe now saw some chance that Bettina would be avenged.

Say what he would, however, he could not inspire Basil with even the minutest particle of gratification. He could see no light through the thick darkness in which they all seemed to be enveloped. Nor were his efforts at consoling Mercy any more successful. With Jim's death all her love for him had returned, and she would sit for hours, her apron thrown over her head, sobbing, and repeating that if she had never left him he would be alive and well, perhaps by this time a reformed man. She did not think he had been murdered ; remembering the scene

at Ben Haller's, how could she? nor perhaps would any one have suspected it save for Mrs Ford's bungling lying statement in reference to the manner in which he had entered the Brixton lodgings? What this Captain Denis could have to do with him, Mercy failed to conjecture. His name had never been mentioned before her, but Job had learned from Ben Haller that the Mr Dent who went to the 'Pot and Kettle' to inquire for Jim was none other than Captain Denis. In fact, at the examination of the prisoner before the magistrate on the day following his arrest at Dover by Mr Green, who had proved correct in imagining that Denis had not crossed the Channel, there was no evidence that tended so strongly to his committal as that of Ben Haller, proving as he did several meetings between this man, who called himself Dent, and the deceased, and, moreover, his having received a letter at that very place announcing the death of the unfortunate Jim.

Still, torture her mind on the subject as she might, Mercy did not believe her husband had been murdered, but never ceased

with him in the housekeeper's room many a time,' she said, in explanation of the amount of feeling she displayed.

'Dear me, I had no idea you had ever seen him; then you knew he had been taken away?'

Mercy nodded to her. She could not trust herself to say any more.

'Have you any idea, Mrs Burritt,' asked Venetia a little solemnly, 'who has had to do with the carrying off of this child?'

'How should I? How should I?' cried Mercy excitedly. 'Why do you ask me this question? I was as sorry as you could be when I heard that Master Dandy was gone.'

Venetia was so surprised at Mercy's manner that she felt in her own mind quite certain that Mercy knew far more than she chose to say, though how this quiet, well-conducted little housewife could have aught to do with the carrying off of Dandy was a puzzle to Venetia.

'Jim Burritt! It was supposed that he had been murdered by Captain Denis, who had all along been suspected by her brother

and Signor Guiseppe. What if it was actually because Jim Burritt had been his tool that Denis had murdered him ?'

She did not say any of this to Mercy, judging it more expedient to treat the subject very quietly. So she pushed the still shaking Mercy into a chair by the little window, as she observed,—

'Yes, I have no doubt you were sorry. It has been a terrible time lately for us all. Lady George is a very great friend of my brother's, and we have been deeply interested in her trouble. You see in high life they have their cares and anxieties as well as you, poor little woman.'

Mercy's answer was a sob.

'I suppose you know that Captain Denis was a cousin of Lady George's husband ?' went on Venetia, trying to interest her and thus gain more information.

'I never heard of Captain Denis till he was took up for murdering my Jim.'

'And you can form no idea of any motive he could have for such a dreadful act ?'

'No more than you, Miss Armfield, since I didn't know as there was such a man.'

Venetia, though quite against all orders she had received, thought that she would make a plunge, which naturally was accompanied by the usual woman's admonition not to tell.

'Of course you will not repeat what I tell you ; but do you know that Captain Denis has been suspected by several people of having carried off the little boy ? He has tried on more than one occasion to cast the odium of this cruel and horrible crime on my brother ; but I think most of the family now suspect Denis.'

This communication had the effect of making Mercy tremble again very violently, as she asked in a scarcely audible voice,—

'Has anything been proved against him ?'

'I think not definitely ; but now that he is taken up, I daresay the whole affair will soon be ferreted out.'

Mercy made no reply, but sat holding her hands together in her lap as though to steady herself, uttering occasionally little hysterical gasps. 'Silence is golden,' was a maxim old Job had inculcated from her

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earliest childhood. 'He would not have his Mercy a chattering, busy-tongued woman,' he said. She was practising this lesson now; she would be silent, and even though Miss Armfield had set her an example in making a confidence, she would not tell her tale. Mercy having made up her mind, was a young person of quite enough decision of character to stick to her resolution. Jim was dead, thus anything she told now could not affect him; but she was his wife, and she did not think it was becoming in her to traduce him even to her dear friend Miss Armfield. She had not said a word to Job about what she had found out, and if any one could be trusted it was Job. No, she would keep all her knowledge to herself, and let them settle the question of who had stolen Lady George's boy as best they could.

It never occurred to her that she had already by her manner let Venetia know she was guarding a secret as plainly as if she had proclaimed it. Venetia was a better diplomat than Mercy. She did not permit her adversary to see that she be-



lieved herself to hold a good card, but finding Mercy was not inclined to be communicative, she wisely let the matter drop, and after a few more gushings of kindly regard she took her leave with the intention of seeking counsel from Guiseppe or Basil as to what was the next step to pursue.

After Venetia had taken her departure, Mercy sat for a long while very still in the arm-chair into which her friend had thrust her. She did not tremble any more, neither did she weep, she was fighting a great battle with herself, fighting it to the bitter end.

The question which arose in her mind was whether she had any right to set up her love for Jim, her wifely duty to him, between this lost child and his mother. If Jim had been alive she would not have hesitated for a moment. Rachel might have made lamentations throughout the whole of Ramah, she would not have betrayed her husband; but now the case was somewhat altered, and was at all events worthy of consideration. Mercy, however, was in no hurry to speak, and a whole hour after Venetia left her she was still

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sitting in the same position, when at last Job came into the back-room.

‘Mercy, lass, this won’t do,’ he said; ‘I’ve watched these tearful moods of yours long enough. There’s work and happiness in life for you yet, my girl, and you must pluck up courage and buckle to.’

‘I am buckling to, daddy,’ she answered, looking him in the face with wide-open eyes, from which, to his surprise, all the tears had passed. ‘I am trying to make up my mind to something, but it’s main difficult.’

‘Don’t think, my girl, be practical and act. There’s that pretty lady in the window as you laughed at when she first came, she’s brought in a power of work, more as I can get through, unless I take a partner—meanwhile come and help. Fetch the irons off the fire and come along—you can smooth down the seams as well as me if you like, and I’m terrible driven to get this yere coat finished.’

Mercy got up at once and proceeded to do as he asked her, and for some time they worked on steadily together. It was the

first time she had made the slightest effort to do anything since Jim's death, and Job in his heart rejoiced at his own success. They were not cheery and chatty over their work as they used to be, but that would come in time, Job hoped—he did not perceive how the mechanical effort she was making was helping Mercy to think.

The outcome of her thoughts was uttered at last, for she all on a sudden dropped the iron on its stand with a little thud, and said,—

‘Suppose, daddy, as you had injured some one very much, and I knowed it, what ought I to do?’

‘As I’d injured some one—whatever’s the girl talking about?’

‘I don’t mean you have. I said *suppose*.’

‘Well, you’d try and make it right if so be I couldn’t do it myself,’ he answered briskly.

‘But always suppose as you’d get into terrible trouble, by my taking it upon myself to interfere?’

‘I shouldn’t expect you to consider me if right was to be done, and I’d done wrong,’ he answered.

‘But loving you very much as I do, I expect I should.’

‘Then you’d be main wrong, Mercy. You should always stick to right and not give in to affection and that kind of weakness.’

Mercy sighed, and Job, after fixing his sharp eyes on her for a few seconds, asked,—

‘Why are you putting all these questions Mercy? There’s something behind them as I don’t understand.’

‘Please don’t ask me, daddy, at any rate not just now—perhaps to-morrow I’ll tell you. I must think a bit first, and thinking is slow work.’

Job hated thinking, at least as far as Mercy was concerned, but he knew quite well that she would not speak unless she chose, so he believed it wiser not to press the subject which was painfully agitating her mental faculties, and for another spell the work went on in the Smith Street shop without a word being uttered by either of them.

At last a customer came in, and Mercy, who since her trouble did not care to be

seen, slipped away up to her own room, where she could think in peace unobserved by even Job's penetrating but kindly eyes.

She came down again for a little while about supper-time, because she considered it her duty to Job, but she did not say more than she was obliged, and soon skulked off to bed, leaving Job to chew the very bitter cud of his own reflections.

The weight that Jim had cast on the little Smith Street household had not even been removed by his death, and Job sat pondering over the change that had come to his house as he smoked his post-coenal pipe in the back parlour, when about ten o'clock a knock came at the door, and Signor Guiseppe put his head in and asked if he could speak to Mrs Burritt.

But Mercy had gone to bed ; she could not be disturbed for that night, and Guiseppe's cross-examination, if on cross-examination he was bent, must be postponed till the morning. He came into the room though and sat down with Job, puffing away at a fine Havanna he had in his mouth. He had never previously put

himself on such familiar terms, and his doing so now would have flattered Job and made him very happy, if he had not been rendered so utterly disconsolate by home troubles that capability of caring much about other matters was well-nigh crushed out of him.

Guiseppe's motive in coming into Job's parlour to smoke was evidently because he thought, in the course of a chat, he might find out from Job whether there was or was not any truth in the suspicion that Jim Burritt or the Jennetts knew anything about little Dandy, a suspicion which Venetia had managed to convey to him on leaving Smith Street.

The conversation, however, proved by no means a successful one. In the first place the two men could only understand each other with difficulty, and in the next place Job had nothing either to tell or conceal. He used pretty strong language in his animadversions against Jim, whom he designated as a 'bad lot,' but as to whether he knew Captain Denis or had ever seen little Dandy, Job was quite ignorant, and

He bids her forget that he is almost branded with the name of blackguard ; tells her to think only of his social position, blemished and bespattered from contact with a felon's cell ; to refuse to believe in the possibility that her husband's cousin and his trusted friend can be guilty of the crime imputed to him ; and he hopes she will be so impressed by the mode in which he argues eloquently in favour of his own innocence, that she will end by being convinced herself that he has been wrongly suspected.

This point gained, which Denis in his cleverness anticipates, there is not much difficulty, he foresees, in reaching the next step—namely, to make Lady George place some confidence in his assertion that he was already on Dandy's track when he was unjustly arrested, and that, if he were only free, in less than twenty-four hours he would place her boy in her arms.

This is the first announcement Lady George has received of Denis' detention, the letter only coming into her hands by an accident, as had any member of her family

or Basil seen it, they would most assuredly have suppressed it. The intelligence, however, so takes her by surprise, that it seems to restore her to her full reason, while at the same time her intellect scarcely directs her as usual, since she is at once overtaken by a strong impulse to set Denis free.

How can she accomplish it, however, she wonders. If she goes to Craigietoun, he will only say justice must have its course—it is unlawful to attempt to condone felony; and she dare not ask Basil Armfield's advice. Still, her heart prompts her not to turn a deaf ear to his tale. May not the restoration of Dandy be her reward for listening to a kindly prompting now?

Yes; Denis had calculated diplomatically when he counted on the effect his letter would have on Lady George. He had finished it, too, by one of those *coups-de-main* by which feminine citadels are so often taken. He invited her to come and see him in his prison, when he would give her some information which perhaps might lead to the recovery of her boy, even if he were never set free. He had baited the trap



well; Lady George was on the verge of falling into it.

‘What use to trust any longer to the advice of her friends?’ she argued. ‘Were it not wiser to be guided by her own good genius, and to act independently? Basil had a high stake dependent on the recovery of Dandy, it was true. Still, he had hitherto been unsuccessful; besides, had not Captain Denis told her about Basil. She shuddered as the recollection of his fearful words seemed to come slowly back to her. Lord Craigietoun was a solid man, with strong, good sense, but all his counsels never ended in anything practical. No; she would act for herself—go to Henry Denis, who could not be so utterly, vilely bad as people said he was—beg, entreat, beseech him to tell her all he knew; and in return she would undertake to help him to the utmost of her power.’

Having arrived at this decision, she thrust the letter into her pocket and went upstairs to put on her bonnet.

It was about eleven o’clock in the morning, and she had not ordered the carriage,

nor indeed been out since her illness. Besides, she thought incognita more fitting for the errand on which she was bent ; so she put on a quiet bonnet and a thick veil, and sent the butler to get her a cab, that official determining that wherever her ladyship went he would accompany her. The cab was at the door, and she was just coming down the staircase to get into it, when she was told that Mrs Burritt wished to speak to her on urgent business.

Lady George's first impulse was to say she could see no one at that moment, but Mercy was at the foot of the stairs, and looked so sad and melancholy in her deep mourning garb that Lady George, who knew she was rather a favourite in the household, could not find the heart to refuse saying a few words to her.

'Please, your ladyship, I am sorry to detain you, but it is something very particular as I have to say,' and Mercy's voice trembled so that the words were scarcely articulate.

'Don't be frightened, my poor girl. Come in here and tell me what it is all about.'

'About Master Dandy, please my lady.'

‘Dandy—my child! What of him?’ and Lady George turned on her with a quick, sharp movement.

Mercy burst out crying.

‘It ain’t my fault, my lady, indeed it ain’t. I only found it out by accident, and he’d have been punished for it.’

‘Who? What are you talking of, girl? Quick, tell me all you know.’

‘Jim, my lady. I heard him and Susan talking of it; but I couldn’t help it—could I? though I was that sorry,’ and Mercy grew more and more incoherent as Lady George became more impatient, and no wonder, for Mercy’s was no pleasant errand in itself, and it was made more difficult by Lady George’s impetuous manner, for, contrary to her usual habits, she actually stamped her foot at poor Mercy in her anxiety to wring from her as quickly as possible all she knew.

‘Go on—speak, can’t you? Who are these people—Jim and Susan?’

‘My husband,’ almost sobbed Mercy; ‘he was a-talking to Susan Ford.’

‘Yes—and they said—’

'Words as made me understand they both know'd where Master Dandy was.'

'And where is he?'

'That I don't know, my lady; but my daddy, that is Job Jennett, he said as I ought to come and tell you as the Fords in Vale Street has had a hand in the matter, and if the young gentleman b'aint there, which I don't think, at least they know where he may be found.'

'How long have you known this?' asked Lady George.

Mercy hung her head.

'Please, my lady, deep as is my regard for you and Master Dandy, I couldn't tell tales on my husband. They can't trouble him now, and daddy said as I had better come.'

'So you sacrificed my boy rather than denounce your husband's wickedness,' and Lady George's tone was very severe.

Poor Mercy began to think that she had always heard from the servants that Lady George was so pleasant and nice; if she had known she was so formidable she would never have come to tell her any-

thing. She pleaded her own cause, however, with a simplicity which touched Lady George more effectually than any lengthy explanation would have done, for she only said very sorrowfully,—

‘He was my husband,’ and the two women of such different stations in life looked at each other, and met on the common meeting ground of love.

Lady George only asked, after a moment’s pause, if Mercy had no idea where Dandy was, but the young widow saw in her eyes that the silence of the last few weeks was forgiven.

‘I don’t know, my lady, and I shouldn’t like to mislead you; but if you was to send some one to the Brixton lodging, where Mrs Ford was stopping when my Jim died, I shouldn’t be surprised if they was to find out something.’

‘There is a cab at the door—suppose we were to get into it and drive there together?’

But Mercy shook her head.

‘‘Tain’t fittin’ for you to go, my lady,’ she said; ‘if Mrs Ford thought as you’d come

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there after the child, he might be put right away.'

'Do you think he is there? Why do you suppose he was carried away? Had your husband any spite against me?' asked Lady George with breathless, rapid excitement.

'They say—that is daddy and the Sennoor seems to think—that this Denis, or Dent as he sometimes calls himself, has to do with it. Seems as he used to have frequent meetings with my Jim in a low tavern in Wenlock Street.'

'He has been arrested on suspicion of—'

'Yes, my lady, but I don't think as my Jim was murdered. It was drink as did it, though Denis might have wished him out of the way, because he held a secret or two of his, it is true, but if so be, he only helped him to the drink.'

'It is very awful; and to think that I should be mixed up with such a strange, terrible history. Oh, my Dandy! I wonder what I can do to find you?'

'Suppose, my lady,' said Mercy, as though struck suddenly with a bright idea, 'suppose

as I was to go to Brixton and look up Mrs Ford, I could say as I was come to see after my Jim's things. If Master Dandy is there, I'd know him in a minnit, and if he isn't, well, she will have no suspicion.'

Lady George accepted at once, and was all feverish impatience for Mercy to be gone—told her to take the cab that was waiting at the door, and gave her money to pay the fare. Meantime she would read Denis' letter again, and reconsider the matter of visiting him in his prison.

So Job and Mercy's sense of justice had prevailed, and in a few minutes she was on her road to Brixton in as hot and energetic pursuit of Dandy as though the finding him could in no way tarnish her husband's memory. The cab sped along at a brisk pace, and was not long in reaching the house, which brought back very sad recollections to Mercy. She stopped about two hundred yards short of it, and got out to walk—she did not wish to arouse an unnecessary suspicion. She knocked at the door—it was opened by a slatternly-looking woman.

Mercy asked for Mrs Ford.

'She went away from here yesterday,' was the dismaying answer, 'and a good thing, too. I don't like them kind of ne'er-do-weel folk in my house.'

'You knew him as died here?' said Mercy.

'Knew him! I should think I did. There's been row enough about the whole thing as to make this 'ere house notorious and get it a bad name for ever.'

'I'm his widow, and I wanted to ask Mrs Ford about the bits of things as he left.'

'Come in and sit down a minnit, you do look tired and bad,' and the slatternly woman opened the door of the front parlour, and pushed a chair towards Mercy.

Mercy did as she was bid. She felt very much disappointed at Mrs Ford's disappearance, and hoped that by a little chat she might get some information about her.

'So Mrs Ford is gone, it's annoying, too. I wanted to have talked to her a bit about my poor man.'

'Tain't a subject about which she is par-



tickler fond—guess it's that as has taken her off so sharp.'

'Where has she gone—do you know?'

'She didn't leave no address, her and the child went off very sudden-like. She paid me up, so it ain't no business of mine, but I shouldn't have taken that child away like that. If it don't die in her arms it will be queer.'

'You don't mean to say as the little boy is ill?'

'It ain't a boy, it's a girl,' cried the landlady.

'A girl! oh, then, it ain't the child as I thought was with Mrs Ford.'

'Do she farm children?' asked the woman.

'Not that I know of, but I thought she had a little boy with her, the son of—of—well, of some one I know, but it don't much matter,' and Mercy got up to take her departure, 'only I *should* like to know where she has gone.'

'She traped down the road with the child in her arms, and a boy with her carrying a parcel—she was making for the 'bus as goes to town, I believe.'

That did not enlighten Mercy much, but

she said, 'Thank you,' and resolved to go and try her luck in Vale Street.

She had discharged the cab, and wandered down the road in search of the public conveyance, with which she was far more familiar. Who could this little girl be Mrs Ford was carrying away to die? she wondered. She had never heard of any little girl belonging to the Fords. While she was pondering on the subject, whom should she see coming along the road but Susan, not dressed with her usual care and taste, but looking draggled and woe-begone, as if some terrible calamity had befallen her.

The two young women's surprise and exclamation at meeting in this out-of-the-way spot was simultaneous, and neither of them felt particularly inclined to tell the other the real motive of her visit to Brixton. In fact, from being rather intimate acquaintances, as they once were, these two had almost become distrustful foes. They both believed that love for Jim had divided them; it might have been the primary cause, but the real reason of their estrangement was more surely to be found in the development of their own char-

acters ; while Mercy's daily revealed a larger amount of sincerity, truth, and gentleness, Susan's each day degenerated more and more into the crooked bye-ways of duplicity and levity.

It suited her, however, for some reason at this moment to be on good terms with Mercy. She held out her hand to her, and told her she was glad to see she had so far recovered from her late shock, as to have wandered such a distance from home.

'I have been to see your mother,' answered Mercy, 'but she is gone.'

'Gone!' and there was a look of genuine surprise on Susan's face.

'Yes, they say as she went away yesterday, and took the little girl. Susan, whoever is that child?'

'Mother's niece,' replied the other, with a quickness that showed falsehood did not sit heavily on her conscience. 'But I can't think wherever they've gone to.' This latter part of the sentence was true.

'The landlady there says as the child is dying, perhaps that's why she has taken it away.'

'But wherever has she taken it to?'

'To its mother.'

'The Lord forbid!' Then she paused and thought. 'No, the old woman has not done that, she'd never have such a happy thought. She's skulked off somewhere—*where*, I should like very much to know. But perhaps she is only humbugging you. She may be there after all.'

'No; that she ain't. I have been sitting in her room. Sure she's in Vale Street.'

'Don't think it. She's too frightened to death of the police to go there.'

'Frightened of the police, why—what has she done?'

'Don't you know as Jim died in her parlour?'

'Yes; but Mrs Ford had nothing to do with his death.'

'No; no more hadn't Denis, but it was mother's lies as made him be took up, and she's afeerd as they'll get hold of her next.'

'Then probably she's skedaddled.'

'Only she's not got either the spirit or the sense to go far, unless she's guided.'

‘ Let’s go to Vale Street and hear if there’s any tidings. I haven’t been living there since mother went away. I’ve been staying with a friend.’

Mercy was nothing loth to accompany her, seeing that she was bent on going to Vale Street before she met Susan.

Arrived there, Susan opened the door with a key, and they went together into the back-room. Mrs Ford was not there, but there was a fire burning brightly in the grate, though the day was hot, and on an old horse-hair sofa near it, something which moved, was lying covered up with an old tartan shawl. Susan saw at once that it was Dandy, and tried to hustle Mercy away, by saying there was no one there; but Mercy did not seem inclined to move, though she had certainly not recognised Dandy in the little heap on the sofa, which, on nearer inspection, she took for the emaciated sickly girl about whom she had been told. His wasted appearance, and the loss of his beautiful curls, had so altered him that no one but a mother could have recognised bright

aristocratic Master Dandy in the emaciated sickly child that lay there, covered up with those rags.

'What's that brat here?' said Susan. 'Where's mother?' Seeing that Mercy did not seem inclined to come away at once, she did not attempt to force her.

After all, it did not matter very much now what she found out, she thought. Denis was in prison; Jim was dead; there might be more money made by telling than by being silent. Dandy did not answer, he had always been afraid of Susan, and, moreover, he seemed too weak to speak; but he turned his eyes on Mercy with a sort of loving expression,—she came to him as a bright spirit out of the dead past. He even managed to draw one little shrunken hand from under the ragged tartan coverlet, and held it out to her. She took it from the sheer kindness that was in her nature, and pressed her lips on it, though it was scarcely as invitingly clean as a baby's hand ought to be.

Susan looked on without speaking. For the first time the thought that had come

to her mother weeks ago, came to her.

That child was dying, and if he died they'd get into a pretty mess. It would be worse than Jim's death ten times over.

Mercy, meanwhile, leant over the couch and spoke to the sick child in those soft tender tones some women habitually use to children. He seemed so pleased, gazed at her with such a trustful look that his countenance quite brightened and lightened up.

She felt a tender pity for the child, who was too weak to run about and play and skip and shout like other little folk.

'What's your name?' she asked, more because one generally asks a child its name, than from any other reason.

'Dandy,' was the almost whispered answer.

Mercy started up with a scream, snatched away the old tartan shawl that covered him, and stood looking at him in utter surprise.

'No,' she cried, 'it can't be possible; you're not Master Dandy. Do you know me?'

He nodded his head and smiled.

'Wouldn't you like to see your mammy?'

He nodded his head still more vigorously, then he gave one of his habitual sighs, as though all hope had long since been dead.

'You blessed, poor sick darling—I'll take you to her this very minnit,' and she wrapped the old coverlet once more round him, and was just going to raise him in her arms in spite of a sort of half protest from Susan, when, turning, she saw, standing just inside by the open door, Mrs Ford and a gentleman she had never seen before.







## CHAPTER X.

### WHOSE CHILD?

**W**HY Mrs Ford left Brixton so suddenly could have been explained in a few words, if either Susan or Mercy had been aware that, on the previous afternoon, she had received a visit from no less important a potentate than Mr Green. He came in quite 'smirking like,' as she expressed it, but for all that the interview did not give her much pleasure, though Mrs Ford scarcely let him observe how thoroughly unwelcome his visit was.

Not for a moment did she guess that he was a detective. He represented himself to be a friend of the deceased Jim, of whose habits and character he knew quite enough to talk glibly.

Mrs Ford was sitting by a small fire when he came in, with Dandy in her lap, in his girl's frock ; not even the astute Green suspected that this faded-looking little girl was Lady George Heriot's missing child. He spoke familiarly of Jim for some time, till he thought he had gained Mrs Ford's confidence, then he shifted very easily to Denis.

Now the very name of Denis gave Mrs Ford the shivers. She blamed herself most thoroughly for his incarceration, as well indeed she might, while at the same time she quietly suspected that he had some very good reason for wishing to be quit of Jim. Mr Green naturally asked her in his unctuous way, whether she thought this Captain Denis had committed a murder, and—well, she did not defend him warmly, upon which Mr Green objected that he could not see for what reason a man of his position should wish to be rid of a more or less insignificant drunken artisan.

‘Drunken,’ said Mrs Ford. ‘That’s it. If Jim had kept his head clear, he’d be alive now.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, you see, when a chap holds another man’s secrets, and is fond of the bottle, he’s dangerous.’

‘Yes, indeed. Then you imagine there were secrets between these two?’

‘Don’t I know it. They were always having their meetings and their talks and their whisperings.’

‘But what could they be about?’ asked Green innocently. ‘Were they mixed up with Irish Land Leaguers or Nihilist plots, or what was it that made this fine gentleman associate with poor Jim?’

‘I don’t know nothing about them furrin’ plots,’ said Mrs Ford, ‘but guess the business was nearer home as was taking up the two as we is talking of. I never did think as Captain Denis would be took up for murder though.’

‘You knew him, I suppose?’

Mrs Ford looked keenly at her interlocutor for a moment, then she answered,—

‘Well, I’ve seen him.’

‘What is he like? Does he look like a murderer?’

‘No, that he don’t. He looks more like a lady’s man. He’s always got up within an inch of his life, and is that pretty spoken.’

‘Rich?’ asked Mr Green carelessly.

‘That’s just it. He’s as poor as a church mouse, and it’s ’cause of the money, I suspect, that this ’ere has happened.’

‘Sad for you that it should have happened in your house; but you do not live here usually, I think?’

‘No, I only came for a little change for this ’ere poor little darling. She’s my sister’s gal, and she couldn’t leave home herself ’cos her hands is full,’ and so saying she rocked Dandy so gently on her knee, that the poor little sick child dozed off.

There was a silence for a few seconds, during which Mr Green watched the woman and child very narrowly. Mrs Ford was the first to break it by asking,—

‘Do you think as Denis ’ull get out of this yere mess as he’s got into, sir?’

‘Very doubtful, I am afraid, and my visit here to-day was partly to speak to you on that very subject. I shouldn’t wonder if you was implicated in it.’

'*Me?*' and the ungrammatical monosyllable was emphatic.

'Unfortunately, you see,' and Mr Green hemmed and looked uncomfortable, as though he scarcely dared proceed; 'unfortunately, when you were examined at the inquest, you did not seem to have a very clear notion of what had really occurred the night Jim Burritt died.'

'I didn't tell the truth, I suppose, you mean?'

'Just so.'

'Well, I only did it because I knew Denis didn't want the folks to know as he and Jim was mixed up. I did it to shield him—can't see as it can have anything to do with me.'

'I suppose it shows you had a good deal to do with him,' said Mr Green, laughing.

'Tain't for the money as he gives me then,' answered Mrs Ford, a little off her guard. 'I ain't got two gold pieces to jingle together. When all's said and done he's a mean devil.'

Mr Green did not testify any surprise at this somewhat intemperate outburst,—he was

afraid of repressing confidences; he only said,—

‘I suppose he owes you money as he did Jim Burritt. I am afraid you will never get it now. If he isn’t convicted, he’ll at least be in prison for a long time.’

‘Won’t they let him out on bail?’

‘I doubt it. They are more likely to put you in.’

Mrs Ford got as white as death, and took to rocking herself and the child vigorously, repeating as she did so,—

‘Whatever shall I do? Whatever shall I do? and I never haven’t done no harm, not so much as to hurt a fly.’

‘There is only one course open to you; turn Queen’s evidence.’

‘Whatever is that?’

‘Why, up and tell all you know about Denis, and they’ll let you go free for your trouble.’

‘But I ain’t got nothing to tell. You know as much as I do. I went to bed and left him in this yere room with Jim on that sofa, and when I came in in the morning Jim was dead and he was gone. I don’t

believe neither as he killed him, it was the drink as did it.'

'Don't you know anything else against Denis?'

She paused a moment, and then she said more guardedly,—

'I might know a little thing or two, but nothing of importance, and I can't think as compromising myself can help me.'

'Well, you'll never get another farthing out of Denis, even if he gets off, he'll always blame you for getting him into trouble, and you might as well try and screw the needful out of some one else. At any rate that is my notion.'

'It's practical,' observed Mrs Ford with a sort of nervous laugh, 'but I ain't very sure if it will jump.'

'Why not?'

'Because, ye see, there are things as people will give you more kicks than half-pence for if you tell them.'

'Not if they gain by the telling?'

'I don't know that—at all events if I was to tell I should like to drive my bargain first. You seem a good sort of man, so I don't

mind telling you as I have a secret of Denis', as I believe a certain great lady in London would give all she possesses to know.'

'Indeed, who is she?'

'That it ain't a bit of use to ask, for I can't say. I never heard her name. Denis was always close, and I don't fancy as Jim knew.'

'Is it about a child?'

'I don't say as it is. I don't say as it ain't. But what do you know about a child?'

'I know that Lady George Heriot, who lives in Chapel Street, Park Lane, has lost a boy, and I know, moreover, that Denis has been suspected of abducting it. If you can give any information which will lead to the recovery of that boy, the reward you will receive will be a very handsome one.'

Mrs Ford's eyes glistened as she looked into Mr Green's face, then at the child, then back at Mr Green. But the little girl that lay sleeping in her lap was so unlike the description that had repeatedly been given him of the dandified Dandy, that he in no way connected them.

'But if I was to decide to tell anything



against Denis, I shouldn't know who I ought to go to,' she said, fencing the subject of Lady George's child.

'I think I could help you,' remarked Green, 'by putting a few coins in your pocket. I hope you'll understand I'm doing it out of regard for the memory of Jim Burritt, who, I believe, was attached to you.'

Mrs Ford grinned—she did not believe in Jim's attachment to herself.

He went on.

'You say you have only got a couple of sovereigns. That is but a poor sum for a lady like you, and Denis, as I take it, will never be able to give you any more; now, if you go to a gentleman, whose address I will give you, he'll make the handsomest terms with you.'

'Who is he?' asked Mrs Ford.

'He is a Mr Armfield, and he lives at 12 Cobbold Place.'

'Why, them's the people my Sue works for. What's he got to do with Denis?'

'Nothing with Denis, except that he has been instructed by Lady George to look for the missing child.'

‘Well, I’ll send a line to my daughter to come and mind this sick babe, and then I’ll go and call on this Mr Armfield, and see if we can’t come to terms for a few bits of information. He’s a gentleman, that I know from Susan, and it is odd as he should know anything of Denis.’

‘That’s right. I shall be glad to hear that I have put you in a good way. Now, I must be off. I’ll look in in a day or two and hear what has happened.’

‘You might find me in my own place. I’m better there, that is, if you are sure as this Mr Armfield can keep me out of trouble.’

‘I have no doubt of it. Good morning.’

‘You have not given me your address.’

‘Oh, I live about in such a promiscuous way where I can, that I doubt if you would ever find me. I’ll look in on you soon.’

Mr Green took his departure, leaving Mrs Ford quite under the impression that he was not ‘of much account, and she shouldn’t wonder if he had been mixed up in a good many baddish transactions hisself.’

He, meanwhile, did not leave Brixton

immediately. He was under the impression that Mrs Ford would not be long before she made a move, and he was right—in about an hour he saw her start with her child in her arms, and a little boy carrying her bag.

It was getting late, however, by the time Mrs Ford reached Vale Street, and Dandy, whom in his weak state the journey had skaken very much, was ailing and fretful, so she determined to make no effort to see Mr Armfield that evening, but to settle herself comfortably into her home quarters. She was disappointed at not finding Susan, but that young person's movements were so very erratic, that she was not altogether surprised at her absence.

Just as it was getting dark she went to the front door to see if she could find a boy to send for some beer ; for a moment she thought her visitor of the morning was on the other side of the road, but she did not feel perfectly positive, and as the man in question knocked at a door down the street while she was still standing there, she came to the conclusion she must have been mistaken.

Next morning she got up rather late, having

had a disturbed night with the child, who was very feverish. Thus, by the time she had dressed herself in her best clothes, and reached Cobbold Place, Basil had long since gone to his office.

Mrs Ford, however, having made up her mind to speak, was not to be baulked by Basil's absence. She knew from Susan of whom the family party consisted, and she asked for Mrs Armfield. The one servant of the Cobbold Place establishment showed her into the dining-room, where Mrs Armfield was sitting marking some linen.

Now Mrs Ford, although she had asked to see the mistress of the house, had not the slightest intention of making a free confession to her. Terms were more easily made with men than with women, she argued, and the first glance at Mrs Armfield at once convinced her that this was no exception to the rule.

‘I want to see your son, ma’am, on a little matter of business,’ she said, ‘and should feel obliged if you will tell me where and when I am likely to find him.’

‘Who are you, and what do you want with

‘You are an impertinent woman, and I feel thoroughly convinced that you are inquiring after my son for no good purpose, but simply to do him some wrong. I shall give you no information about him whatever ; and if you do not march out of this house pretty quickly, I’ll give you in charge of the police !’

The police at that moment was perhaps the very last national institution of which Mrs Ford wished to hear. A sort of shiver passed over her for a moment ; then, however, summoning up all her pluck, she began to revile Mrs Armfield in language which was neither elegant nor polite.

An able tactician might have judged it perhaps to be scarcely the most likely way of making good money terms for herself, but Mrs Ford concluded otherwise. She had been brought up in an atmosphere of bullying ; by bullying, therefore, to her mind, was the most effectual way of storming every fort.

Her tongue, however, which began to clamour somewhat loudly, was suddenly stopped by the entrance of Venetia, who,

attracted by the loud talking, came to see who was quarrelling with her mother.

Mrs Ford had frequently heard Susan speak in favourable terms of Venetia, and the girl's fair, loveable face impressed her; so she stopped her tirade, and dropped a little curtsy.

'I and your good mamma were having a little friendly dispute, miss; perhaps you can set it right. I want to see your brother to tell him something as I've learnt in a roundabout way about a child—'

'You're not going to repeat to my daughter—'

Whatever Mrs Armfield was going to say was cut short by Venetia, who cried out,—

'Lady George Heriot's boy! Oh, Basil will be so glad! Let us go to him at once!'

'My dear Venetia, what has Basil to do—'

'With this business?—everything, dearest mother. Do you not know that he has been working night and day to find Lady George's boy?—that his whole heart is

wrapped up in it, and that this news will give him the very greatest pleasure?’

Venetia, in her enthusiasm, had said a great deal more than was perhaps altogether wise, and the effect of her words was quite different on her two listeners.

Mrs Ford looked exceedingly delighted — Mrs Armfield proportionately displeased. The one saw a larger sum of money than she had ever anticipated in the especial interest which she heard Basil took in this affair; the other was annoyed at finding he had a strong interest in anything of which she herself was not the centre.

But Venetia was too excited to note the countenances of either her mother or Mrs Ford — or, in fact, to study causes at all. She hurried upstairs for her bonnet, and suggested that she and Mrs Ford should proceed at once to Whitehall in a cab.

Mrs Armfield saw them depart in no very temperate mood. She was annoyed at the discovery that pregnant events had been occurring around her of which she had been kept in total ignorance, while, at the

same time, she was too proud to ask her daughter for an explanation. The many disagreeable things she had in her mind to say she would reserve for a *tête-à-tête* with Basil.







## CHAPTER XI.

### COMING HOME.



ON re-reading Denis' letter after Mercy left her, Lady George decided that she would not pay the culprit a visit in his prison, at all events not till Mercy had returned, and she heard what tidings she could give her.

Her excitement and impatience, however, knows no bounds ; she wanders about the house in such a state of feverish frenzy, her eyes shining like balls of fire, that the servants congregate in little knots and wonder what they had better do. This new form of Lady George's 'madness,' as they call it, alarms them not a little.

While they are still debating whether they shall send for Lord Craigietoun or the doc-

tor, a note, brought by a Whitehall messenger, arrives from Basil Armfield.

In fear and trembling lest it may have some new and strange effect on her ladyship, the butler gives it to her.

She tears it open without pausing in the rapid walk she has been taking up and down the drawing-room for more than half-an-hour, looking out of the window longingly each time she passes it to see if there are any signs of Mercy's return.

A loud cry bursts from her lips as she reads. The letter only contains one short sentence, but it is almost the first ray of hope that has illumined her life for many a long month. 'Do not,' it says, 'leave the house even for half-an-hour, as any moment may bring you your boy.—Yours ever, BASIL ARMFIELD.'

Had Basil seen Dandy's emaciated condition when he penned these few rapid lines, it is doubtful whether he would have judged it expedient to arouse what, after all, might only prove a fallacious hope.

His reason for writing it was partly to prepare her for Dandy's return, partly be-

cause the doctors had told him that a note of joy struck on her nervous system would probably restore its harmony. Basil, be it remembered, was not aware that Lady George had learnt aught of Denis' detention, still less that she had received a letter from him and a subsequent visit from Mercy.

If her impatience was almost past control when she was only waiting for that young person's return, it became an hysterical paroxysm after she received Basil Armfield's letter, frightening the servants to such a degree, that they decided it would come to her ladyship's finishing her days in a lunatic asylum if something did not happen to mend matters. Not a little thankful were they when, a few minutes later, Venetia arrived. She was not very intimate in Chapel Street, having only lately been introduced to Lady George ; still the servants knew she was Mr Armfield's sister, and, as such, they were inclined to trust her. She looked very grave, however, much more grave than they would have expected, considering the good news that Master Dandy was found. She took the lady's maid, for whom she asked,

into the dining-room, and having closed the door, she inquired very eagerly what effect her brother's note had had on Lady George. When she heard of the hysterical excitement under which she was labouring, she repeated,—

‘Poor lady, poor lady; I am so sorry, so very sorry for her.’

‘Why, miss, isn't Master Dandy coming along with Mr Armfield?’

‘Yes, my brother and Mercy Burritt will be here with him very soon, but oh, if you saw him. I am afraid he is only coming home to die.’

The maid gave a little scream.

‘Her ladyship—whatever will her ladyship do? She'll go quite mad,—she's nearly mad already.’

‘I think I had better see her,’ said Venetia, who seemed rather to dread the task that had been assigned to her. ‘I will try and prepare her a little. In the meantime, get a room and some clean linen ready for the poor child, and let the family doctor be sent for.’

After these preliminaries, Venetia went up to the drawing-room where Lady George

was, and was more alarmed by the state of nervous excitement in which she found her than even the servant's description had prepared her to be.

She recognised Venetia at once, however, and rushed up to her, crying out,—

‘Where is he? Where is the child? Basil is coming, is he not? he will keep his word, and bring my Dandy, not his corpse—not his corpse!’

And as she repeated the latter part of the sentence her voice rose into a scream.

Venetia took her tenderly by the hand and tried to soothe her, but she was so shocked and horrified, that it was with much difficulty she could master her own emotion. Lady George's cry, as it seemed to Venetia to emanate from a half-distracted brain, had such a ring of truth about it when she thought of Dandy, as for a moment she had seen him when she accompanied Basil into Mrs Ford's back parlour, that she scarcely knew how to answer the poor mother's questions.

‘Basil and Mrs Burritt will be here very soon with the little boy; do calm yourself,

dear lady, or I am afraid the sight of your excitement will frighten the poor little man.'

'Then he is alive. He will know me?'

'Know you? Yes, of course. He knew Basil and Mercy at once. But who told you he was ill?'

'Ill! My child is ill—dying!'

'I hope not, dear lady. He has been pretty roughly treated, you see, and perhaps has not altogether had as good food as he has been accustomed to, but in a very short time, I trust, with good nursing he will—'

But Lady George interrupted her.

'Not dead? You will assure me my Dandy is not dead? *He* told me Basil would bring me his corpse!'

Before Venetia had time to make any farther answer, a cab drove up to the door, which was opened, the butler being on the watch, and Basil carrying Dandy, his poor little shrunken frame wrapped in Mrs Ford's best shawl, came into the house, straight up into the drawing-room, where he was told Venetia was with Lady George.

Without speaking a single word, he put the boy into her arms, and for a few moments there was nothing heard but sobs, interrupted by Dandy's feeble little ejaculations of 'Mammy! mammy!'

To see Lady George crying over the boy was a relief both to Venetia and Basil, since they felt that for a time at all events she was saved, and that, this outburst over, she would recover her usual calm serenity.

She made no remark about the change in the boy; did not appear as shocked as Basil had been when he saw him, she only sat there weeping over him, without speaking, till the doctor arrived, and sought to bring a little practical sense to bear on the situation.

He saw at a glance that the child was very ill, shook his head when he looked at Basil unperceived by Lady George, prescribed milk and tonics, and told them he would come back in an hour, when the boy had been put into some decent clothes, and see if he was ready for a romp with him.

But Dandy gave a sigh, one of those

melancholy sighs in which he had indulged so freely of late. The doctor was an old and a very favourite friend of Dandy's, but the poor child had not the strength to romp with him.

'Me tant,' he said, in his baby way; 'me just be here and be quiet,' and he nestled his head to his mother's breast, and shut his weary eyes. 'Dandy quite good and happy. Not send Dandy away again, mammy? He will be a good boy.'

'No, my pet, my love, my darling! Were they unkind to you?'

Dandy opened his eyes and looked at her.

'Nobody love Dandy there. Me want my own clothes. Not a girl's. Dandy isn't a girl; is he, mammy?'

This had been perhaps the poor child's hardest trial, this dressing him up in girl's attire.

'Would you like to have on your velvet frock, my pet?' whispered the mother among her sobs.

'Yès,' and he looked quite bright and smiling at the idea. 'Where's nurse?'



‘Nursesey is not here; shall I dress you, Master Dandy?’ suggested Mercy, who had been standing respectfully at a distance, the tears coursing down her cheeks. He nodded his head and held his arms out to her.

‘You shall be my nursesey now,’ he decided.

But though he was quite ready to go with Mercy and have on the velvet frock, he had no idea of being separated from his mother.

‘Mammy come too,’ he said.

‘Come along, my man,’ cried Basil cheerily. ‘I’ll carry you up to your nursery, on condition that you’ll let me see you in this fine velvet frock.’

‘Yes,’ nodded Dandy; ‘you stop a bit till I’m dressed.’

So the little cavalcade proceeded upstairs, leaving Venetia alone in the drawing-room.

When Basil returned to her, which he did after he had carried Dandy upstairs, she exclaimed,—

‘How very odd that his first thought on coming back should be to have on his velvet frock.’

‘Poor little fellow, I fancy his refined nature has suffered more from uncleanness and untidiness than we should almost believe possible at his age ; dressing him as a girl too has been a terrible trial to him.’

‘He looks fearfully ill, Basil ; do you think he will live ?’

‘I am sadly afraid he will not, and if he does not, God help my darling Julia.’

‘I found her in a very excited, almost unreasonable state. The maid says she thinks she has had a letter from Captain Denis. She was just going out for the first time since her illness when Mercy arrived.’

‘A letter from Denis ! I wish the brute was hanged. He deserves it if any man on this earth ever did.’

‘I wonder what they will do to him ?’

‘Nothing. No villain ever gets his deserts ; but if the authorities are such idiots as to let him off, he has got a foe or two in Italy who will make it rather hot for him, I fancy.’

‘You do not mean Signor Guiseppe ?’

‘He is not in Italy,’ said Basil, with a half laugh ; ‘look here, Venetia, don’t you

try and humbug me any longer. You have taken it into that unwise little noddle of yours to fall in love with the signor. It is foolish—worse than foolish, it is impossible that anything can ever come of it.’

‘Oh, Basil, don’t be unkind. Mamma is sure to disapprove, but at least I hoped to have you for a coadjutor.’

‘Venetia—good gracious! You do not really mean that you are serious, really entertain any idea of one day marrying Guiseppe Belsospiro?’

‘Subject to the approval of my family, I consented some weeks ago to be his wife, but I would not let him say anything about it till all this sad business was brought to some termination, knowing how much you were worried. I should not have spoken of it to-day, if you had not begun to talk of it yourself.’

‘But Guiseppe must be mad,’ exclaimed Basil angrily. ‘What right has he to ask you to marry him? He cannot support a wife.’

‘I do not think he is quite so destitute as that,’ answered Venetia with a smile; ‘besides, there is such a thing as work.’

‘Work, indeed! My dear Venetia—such a marriage is totally unfitted for you.’

‘I do not think I am likely to make a better one,’ she said very quietly, ‘besides, I love Guiseppe Belsospiro.’

‘That little fat round-about Italian! positively, Venetia, if you were not my sister, the idea of loving him would make me laugh.’

The tears came into Venetia’s eyes, but Basil either did not, or did not choose, to notice them.

So this was to be another instance of the course of true love never running smooth, only that the objection should come so strongly from Basil was, Venetia considered, rather hard to bear.

She resolved, however, for the present to have no farther dispute with him on the subject. She would see later on if it were not possible to make an ally of Lady George. Only, of course, everything depended on how that affair turned out. From what she had heard and seen she did not imagine, if Dandy died, that Lady George’s health would be such that she

would be fit, at any rate for many, many months to marry any man.

A few minutes later the shrunken ghost of a child was carried into the room in his velvet frock with the point lace collar, his short hair brushed back off his drawn, bloodless face, and Venetia felt very miserable as she thought on what a thread the happiness of her own and Basil's lives hung if they depended on the existence of the fragile little atom Mercy had propped among the sofa cushions, and who lay there, his thin hand resting in his mother's, trying to smile on them all, but with that sort of sunless smile which was the more painfully sad from its very effort to be cheerful.

Since Dandy's arrival, Lady George had not spoken to Basil, she had not thanked him for bringing the boy, or by even a look conveyed the slightest sense of gratitude for all the trouble he had taken.

It surprised him much, but it pained him more, for it naturally impressed him with the idea that even by the joy of seeing Dandy she had not been restored to her usual thoughtful kindly self. How could he know

aught of the mind-poisoning from which she had been suffering of late ?

On a sudden she exclaimed,—

‘ Now, tell me, where was the child, and who took him away ? ’

Basil and Mercy told their tale in turns, Lady George sitting very still the while, holding Dandy’s hand as she listened attentively to every word.

When they had finished she held out her other hand to Basil, and said in a low voice,—

‘ I have wronged you, but you will forgive me, and help me to bear whatever the future may have in store for me.’

He bent over her hand and kissed it without speaking. Before his sister and Mercy he could say nothing, besides, did Lady George’s words really mean the crowning of all his hopes ?

He could scarcely believe it possible. That fragile life still lay between him and happiness.





## CHAPTER XII.

### VENGEANCE.

**I**T is about mid-day, and two men are sitting together in Arrigo Abbrugnido's restaurant. They are Guiseppe Belsospiro and the artist Monico Velucci, by whom Denis was recognised as that Arnold, once treasurer of the secret society of La Mano Destra in Naples. They have ordered breakfast, and already the risotto is on the table; but instead of attacking it they are gesticulating freely, and gabbling Italian with such rapid utterance that it were scarcely possible for an Englishman, unless he happened to have passed years in Italy, to follow them. It was not difficult, however, to discover the subject they were discussing to be no very

pleasing one, and Guiseppe Belsospiro's more than usually excited mien denoted almost a frenzy of interest in the matter in hand.

Denis is in prison on a charge of murdering Jim Burritt. Lady George Heriot's boy has been restored to her; there can then be no longer any motive for withholding from Monico Velucci the tale of how this Denis, Arnold, as he was called in Italy, had betrayed and deserted poor Bettina, the miller's daughter of Veccia, leaving her to die of a broken heart. It was in order to pour out his whole soul in gushing invectives against Denis, that Guiseppe had asked his friend Velucci to breakfast here this morning; nay, more, having relieved himself by telling his story, he demanded in return that Velucci should aid him to concoct such a desperate vengeance as to make all Englishmen feel it was no light matter to tamper with the honour of the black-eyed daughters of La bella Italia.

Vengeance on a man in prison!

Surely the idea was a preposterous one. These Italians, however, did not seem to



regard it as such, for Monico Velucci entered, as Guiseppe had expected, with desperate eagerness into the spirit of *vendetta* as soon as it was explained to him of what Denis had been guilty. They both agreed that English law would not seriously entertain the belief that Denis had murdered Jim Burritt, or even that he was guilty of manslaughter, in which case, as Guiseppe said,—

‘He will not only get off scot free, but be worshipped as a hero and martyr by all his friends who do not happen to know, as we do, that he is the very lowest canaille.’

‘We will make a compact here this day,’ cried Velucci, ‘that if the law spares him, there shall be war to the knife between him and ourselves.’

And as he spoke he started up, and seizing a table knife that lay beside him, he waved it theatrically in the air.

‘Basta, basta, Signor Velucci, stick to your paint pots,’ interrupted a voice behind him, which was Italian, yet in no wise vindictive, ‘and don’t mistake knives for brushes.’

It was Abbrugnido himself, arriving not only with a fresh dish—a frittura—in some

surprise that the former one had not yet been tasted, but followed by two more guests for whom it was now evident that Belsospiro and Velucci had been waiting. The one was our friend—everybody's friend—Mr. Green, again wearing his Italian disguise and striving to act up to it in a manner that not a little amused the *bona fide* Italians; the other proved to be the man who had identified Denis at the corner of Rathbone Place, a certain sharp knowing Neapolitan of the name of Barri, himself a member of 'La Mano Destra,' and in politics a very advanced Liberal indeed. Though far from a rich man, being, in fact, only a small chemist in Naples; still, he had left his business in the hands of an assistant, and had come at his own expense to London to seek out this blackguard Arnold, on information which had reached him from Velucci.

That these three angry fire-eating Italians would commit some terrible act of vengeance, and get themselves thereby into direst trouble if left to the unbridled counsels of their own hearts, Mr Green strongly suspected. For that very reason he resolved

to be one of the conclave about to meet that morning to sit on Denis; but he added to his professionally habitual wish to stop mischief, a strong desire to see farther into the characters and habits of a people with whom even Mr Green's cosmopolitanism had not hitherto brought him into frequent contact. He, too, believed that Denis would get off on the charge of murdering Jim, but he knew he would only come out of prison to be popped back again on another charge,—that of kidnapping Lady George's boy.

That these Italians, however, should draw lots to decide which of them should pursue Denis to the death, by duel or otherwise, was what Green had come there to prevent.

The two new comers, ushered in by Abbrugnido, were received with much cordiality. Though Guiseppe only now saw Barri for the first time, the Neapolitan had great belief in Signor Green, and had been much pleased to hear from Velucci that he had offered to take part in the conference.

The conversation was carried on chiefly in Italian, of which the detective knew just

enough to make himself understood, though some of the involved and highly florid decorations with which these natives of the land of song interlarded their sentences, were more or less lost upon Green. But he was not above owning his ignorance, and requesting that anything he did not comprehend might be explained to him forthwith. By dint, then, of making inquiries, he came to understand the whole story of young Bettina, which Guiseppe told with again many fierce interpolations for his and Barri's benefit. In fact, the more the little singer thought of his niece and her sad fate, and the oftener he told the history of Arnold's *alias* Denis' perfidy, the more furiously angry he became; throwing his fat, short arms about with a kind of windmill motion, and using in turn every strongly-pointed invective which his mother tongue—so rich in oaths—provides; finishing up with, '*Nome di Dio*, but if this man escapes my vengeance, then may that of Heaven fall on me!'

'Miserable dog of an Englishman, who seduces our daughters and steals our money,' cried Barri, bringing his doubled fist down

upon the table with a crash that made the breakfast things dance and ring again.

‘His ruin—his utter ruin or his death. Let us swear it. Ho! Arrigo, glasses and a bottle of Inferno, that we may drink health and happiness to whichever of us three succeeds in bringing utter disgrace and condign punishment upon this vile Inglese!’

The speaker was Velucci, and his tone was solemn and earnest, if his attitude savoured of the theatrical.

The wine is brought in and the glasses filled. ‘*Vendetta a l’Inglese!*’ is uttered in sepulchral tones by Velucci, and then, amid an impressive silence, the wine of vengeance is drunk; Green alone letting his glass remain untasted before him.

During a short pause, each of those concerned seemed to be reflecting after his own fashion on the course to be pursued. Velucci slowly, calmly and with dignity, for he ever viewed both the ills and blessings of life from a philosophical stand-point; Barri with a fussy, yet practical impatience; and Guiseppe with that savagery peculiar to gentle, kindly natures when once they

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have pulled themselves together to be cruel.

‘Maledetto briccone,’ he cries ; ‘oh, that I had his throat here between these hands!’

‘Silenzio,’ puts in Green, to whom this wild talk meant either nothing at all, in which case he heartily despised it, or else was likely to bring about some deed of vengeance for which one, if not more, of those concerned might go to the gallows, and he, the immaculate Green himself, get into trouble of no mean order.

‘I cannot sit here and listen to this, gentleman,’ he said very quietly. ‘When Signor Velucci here invited me to assist at this meeting, I thought the steps that you meditated taking against this man Denis were to be perfectly legitimate, and confined within the strict limits of the law?’

‘Law be d—d!’ cried Barri ; ‘what know I of English law?’

‘This man Denis has committed a fraud in Naples. You must—’

‘Cospetto!’ roared Guiseppe excitedly. ‘I who live in England know how impossible it is legally to touch any one in this

‘A blow finishes a man,’ said Green, laughing. ‘The promise of a blow makes him die a death every breath he breathes.’

‘Molto bene—molto bene,’ cried Guiseppe. ‘We will promise and perform.’

‘But if we write a letter to this Denis, will he ever receive it?’ asked Barri. ‘In Italy prisoners receive no missives.’

‘The officials of every prison in London are known to me personally,’ answered Mr Green. ‘I will undertake to see that this letter reaches its destination.’

Arrigo Abbrugnido was summoned from the room downstairs, where, by this time, there were a few stray customers, and pens, paper, and ink were demanded forthwith.

For a time there was a silence, interrupted only by the scratching of pens, as the three foreigners each wrote the letter to Denis, which he thought the most intimidating and the best fitted to the occasion.

Green, meanwhile, looked on with a smile on his face, as he reflected how differently three Englishmen would have behaved under similar circumstances. The mixture of childishness and ferocity that exhibited itself in

the characters of these three men, puzzled John Bullish Green not a little, with all his experience.

The letters finished, it was obvious that the temporary silence was but as the lull that precedes a storm. Each man read out his own composition in turn, and then they all three, talking together, gesticulated, and seemed to quarrel violently over the different opinions or remarks that ought or ought not to be inserted or erased from the said letters—the first idea being that the best of the three letters should be chosen.

So loud was the clamour, that Arrigo Abbrugnido put his head in at the door more than once, and would have expostulated roundly with them, despite the motto of the house,—

‘LIBERO È LO SFOGO,’

if he had not felt tolerably safe from any unpleasant sequel to this animated discussion, in the countenance and presence of the police official, who, he felt sure, would not allow the public peace to be infringed.



It was a long time, however, before Mr Green attempted to interfere with the protracted and noisy wrangle. Perhaps he thought it safer and wiser to let some of the superfluous steam work itself off before he ventured to put in any farther word of advice.

Time, however, was precious to Mr Green, and he began to think he had wasted an almost undue amount over the working of this Italian cabal, so he decided to settle it without more ado.

'Signori,' he said, drawing their attention, which was no easy matter, so great was the din, by getting up and putting himself into an oratorical attitude. 'Signori, there need be no farther dispute about the matter. Let all three of the letters be addressed to Denis, and I will take charge of them forthwith. To think that there are three energetic, desperate men awaiting his release from prison will render his agony threefold.'

'Well spoken—well spoken, Signor Green,' cried the trio, and for a moment or two the Babel ceased, while the envelopes were being addressed.

The scene altogether, though terribly in earnest, was almost ludicrous from its very intensity; and it was obvious from the expression of Green's face that he thoroughly accepted the ridiculous side of the picture, and was pacifying these men as he might have pacified so many rebellious tiresome children. Not but that he fully intended to have the letters delivered; he knew that they would, as he had said, prove three bitter pills for Denis, whose character, like that of perhaps every thoroughly bad man, had an unmistakably cowardly side, for all his boldness in evil, his animal courage and bullying ways.





## CHAPTER XIII.

### DENIS IN PRISON.

**S**INCE Captain Denis has been snatched by the strong arm of the law from that society which he considered he was wont to adorn, and has been compelled to decorate instead a cell in Clerkenwell Prison, where he will have to await his trial for the wilful murder of Jim Burritt, he has not been idle. Idleness indeed was never one of the captain's foibles. There was ever an active, if silent, demon within him that must be up and doing. Moreover, it is in action that he has found, since his incarceration, the only escape from thoughts which even he cannot stand. He believes, too, even now, most firmly in himself and in his

power to extricate himself from his present most unpleasant and awkward position.

It is the evening of the fourth day since his arrest, and already he has secured the services of a very celebrated solicitor to assist him at the trial, and has had two interviews of more than an hour each with that great and busy man, who, by-the-bye, so far firmly believes in his client's innocence, and has cheered him considerably by telling him so. Denis took very high ground with him indeed. He spoke of the accusation with contempt and derision, and designated his imprisonment on a charge of murder 'a stupendous bore.'

'I give you my honour,' he said, 'I keep fancying every moment they will come and fling open the door, and bid me go free with all kinds of apologies.'

To which the man of law answered smilingly that he hoped they would.

'Really,' pursued Denis, 'one doesn't care to talk of these things; but in my position, with my friends and connections, why, my dear sir, I could command any mortal thing I wanted in any way.'

‘No doubt,’ said the attorney, who was a bit of a toady himself.

‘Now, what I say is, where’s the motive? What in the wide world could it matter to me whether the poor lad lived or died? But it really is beneath one to enter into the matter at all, and I feel annoyed with myself whenever I give it a serious thought,’ and much more to the same effect.

Another important step for his safety, at least so he thought it, he had taken on the first day of his confinement, and this was to write to Lady George a mysterious and terrible letter, couched in strong, if singularly wild language, and in which he told her again and again that his lips were sealed as to the why and the wherefore—the very causes of his compelled silence, and the means and agents he was to employ toward the result he promised her should she comply with his conditions. He will lead her to her boy—ay, straight to her long-lost, idolized Dandy—but first he, Denis, must be free. How she is to make him so he does not trouble to suggest.

Apparently he considers that in so simple

a matter she has but to will to succeed. But should there be any difficulty in that matter? He tells her at least to come to him—to come instantly, as any delay in seeing her may be fraught with imminent peril to her child.

He thought, as he despatched it, that it was one of the cleverest missives which even a Machiavellian diplomat of the first order, as he esteemed himself, had ever endorsed. What precise result it would produce he could not exactly say.

‘Who can ever tell what a woman will do under any given circumstances?’ he muttered, with his old sneer; but that within a very few hours he should behold some very marked effect spring from his handiwork, he never doubted for a moment.

And yet, much to his surprise and horror, he had had no reply to that momentous letter of any kind whatever. As far as he knew, on this the fourth day, he might just as well never have sent it at all.

There is always something singularly unnerving in the unforeseen, and this, the one outcome of his laboured measure which

he had never even glanced at as on the cards, began about this time to weigh him down with the first dawning of a despondency, which, growing and intensifying with each succeeding hour, threatened at about seven in the evening to assume the ghastly features and leaden hue of despair.

Having money at his disposal, and being only a prisoner awaiting his trial, he was allowed what food he chose to pay for. At the present moment a roast chicken, half-a-pint of good claret, with other delicacies, stand ready to his hand, but for the first time he feels an utter loathing for food. Drink he could, but it must be brandy—long draughts of brandy—or nothing. This he has not ordered. He did not think it would have a good effect on the authorities. Moreover, he had a dim idea that it would be refused him as against the rules. He is sick at heart, and for the first time in his life asks himself, when too late, whether evil pays—whether he had not done better to adhere to the good principles in which he had been brought up,

and which he had witnessed and followed in the days of his boyhood.

‘Bah!’ he says; ‘it wasn’t in me—I couldn’t do it. Right and wrong is all conventional rubbish. We are what we are, and obey an irresistible destiny. What are the *good* men I have known? Muffs—canting muffs! Look at Armfield. A mild young man, who is mightily stuck up and pleased with himself because he happens never to have done two or three things which he has never been tempted to do. Confound such milk-and-water natures! say I; I’d rather be the chief of a band of robbers. Give me the courage that risks all to win all! I hate a fellow who has got all his passions under his thumb, like so many poor fettered sheep; so does every woman, who is a true woman—who has a drop of blood in her veins, or one spark of spirit in her soul. Yet Lady George, I doubt, loves Armfield well,—damn him! Well, what does that prove? That she’s a poor creature after all. But I have loved her—loved her savagely. Pshaw! it was but her beauty I cared for!



Ha, ha! and she should soon have found that out, had she been fool enough to marry me. What, can I still laugh?—then things cannot be so bad with me.'

And now he rose and paced his narrow cell like a caged beast its den—four steps, and then perforce turn back. Inaction, forced inaction, was beginning to tell fatally upon him. There was nothing to do. Books and papers he had, but except such brief portions of the latter as related to his case, he found he could not read. His eyes, indeed, read, but his thoughts refused to follow them.

After ten minutes' pacing he sits again, but five minutes later starts up and resumes his striding. Life is becoming very hard to him.

'Come,' he says at last, 'they shall not know my appetite fails;' and he carves and messes about the food which has been brought him; he even forces himself to swallow a morsel or two, but it is a great effort. He gets on better with wine, which, having once tasted, he finishes with little difficulty. It even brings him a kind of momentary comfort; and after a time he

feels drowsy and falls asleep. The preceding night, for the first time, 'nature's second nurse' had shunned him, and he had fondly ascribed his wakefulness to want of exercise.

But his longed-for oblivion is not to be of long duration. He dreams with hideous vividness the scene of his latest crime over again. His thumbs are on the apple of the doomed Burritt's throat—stealthily he has seized him, mercilessly he presses. Jim's face turns yellow, then green; but—oh, horror! what never happened in the life—his eyes flash open in the convulsions of death, and glare like balls of fire upon his murderer, whilst a voice, indebted to no tongue, yells out,—

'Yes, you have killed me, but wait!'

And then, with irresistible force and arms of red-hot steel, the victim seized his assassin in turn, flung him backwards without an effort, and with such a peal of laughter as yet was never heard on earth, proceeded to strangle the now cowering and powerless Denis, who, just as he seemed to reach the death agony, with a loud agonised yell awoke,

bathed in cold perspiration, and trembling in every limb. His cry, which had been real enough, brought the warder hurrying to his assistance.

‘What’s all this noise about, eh?’

‘N—nothing, I was only—having a nap.’

‘So I thought when I was in just now; you seemed pretty sound. I have brought these yere three letters.’

‘Three!’ exclaimed Denis, and he thought. ‘Then, out of three, one must surely come from Lady George. What a fool I was to doubt my letter could fail of an answer! I, who am always right.’

The long July evening had at last closed in, and the above reflection was uttered in well-nigh total darkness; but the jailor now struck a light, which not only dispelled the natural obscurity, but also the comforting moral darkness in which the prisoner for a moment indulged as to the authorship of at least one of the three letters.

‘A foreigner,’ he said contemptuously, flinging aside the first. ‘Eh! another foreigner,’ gazing at the second; but he kept staring at it, because the third was underneath it, and

he dreaded to dispel his last gleam of hope too rudely.

Sanguine, however, that it was from Lady George, his curiosity brooked no long delay. Slowly he draws the second letter aside.

‘Damnation!’ he mutters, ‘now by all the fiends if it isn’t another of those cursed Italians; and all with London postmarks too!’

He was now alone, and proceeded to open and peruse these letters, with whose purport we are already acquainted.

Their text it would not be either edifying or desirable to transcribe, to say nothing of the difficulty of doing anything like justice in translation, to their glowing invective, relentless purpose, and as it were the rapture at the torture each writer felt he was inflicting, which was so abundantly expressed in each one of the assegai-like missives.

Denis’ familiarity with the Italian tongue spared him no syllable of the taunts, vituperation, or the terrible threats, of which these closely written pages were rife; but there was still just enough of the Englishman left in him to make his first impulse one of rage and savage defiance.

in this same world, split into particles of countless new individualities, even as the leaves of the trees, the waves of the sea.

‘ But how to die ?

‘ There is always a cold and creeping, as of a reptile-like horror about the form. Hang himself ? The cell had been fitted up as if with a special view to defeat such a design.

‘ He was sorry. He would have liked such a bloodless end—if his end must be self-inflicted.

‘ His penknife !—ah ! he remembers. That had been taken from him when he was searched on entering.

‘ Starvation ! Too slow, and besides, they say impossible in presence of food. But “ what’s sweet to do, to do will ever find ” ’

. . . . .

When his jailor came to call his fashionable prisoner the following morning, he found him sitting dead on the couch, having bled to death after opening the artery in his left arm.

The implement used was a piece of his watch-glass which he had broken for the purpose.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### BROUGHT TOGETHER.

**C**UISEPPE BELSOSPIRO'S lessons to Miss Blanche Astor went on as usual, but owing to the conversation that had arisen between master and pupil about Basil Armfield, the acquaintance, which had at first been a mere formal one, had developed into almost an intimacy.

It was not surprising that Miss Astor had discovered from the Italian, who had certainly not learnt to keep his feelings under control, the secret of his love for Venetia ; but she would perhaps have been not a little surprised if she had been aware that he, in his turn, suspected that Basil himself was not wholly indifferent to her. It was

a suspicion, too, which dwelt on his mind and made him sad, knowing full well as he did of his friend's devoted attachment to Lady George.

But what could he do? It was scarcely fair to betray Basil's confidence; and, at the same time, it was not right to foster Miss Astor's penchant for the handsome young diplomat.

She twitted him sometimes for his apparent pre-occupation, ascribing it entirely to his love for Venetia. Of the oaths taken in conjunction with Velucci and Barri Miss Blanche Astor knew nothing, any more than she did of Basil's love for Lady George.

She was a bright merry girl, instinct with life and joy, but like a child who, while engrossed in looking for rare pebbles on the sea-shore, does not perceive the gathering of the waters that will soon surround and overwhelm it, she was little prepared for the stormy current which was rapidly advancing towards her.

Denis had died in prison by his own hand. She had not had time even to read the startling paragraph in the papers before

Guiseppe Belsospiro, dishevelled in appearance, his hair uncombed, his fat face as white as ashes, burst into her boudoir with the intelligence.

He had been to Cobbold Place and found Venetia had gone to Lady George, so in his excitement and desire for some one to whom he could unburden his mind, he had at once thought of his new friend. His announcement was not, however, as startling to Miss Astor as he had perhaps expected, since she knew very little of Captain Denis. It was not till he poured forth the full recital of everything that had occurred that Miss Astor woke up to the fact that what she called a 'tremendous life-drama' had been going on all around her, she herself playing in it a modest part, and all the while she had known nothing about it.

'Oaths of vengeance, secret societies, Bettina, a suicide in prison,—why, it beat melodrama into fits.'

And Miss Astor grew as excited as Guiseppe, only more radiant in her excitement as she listened to him.

A change, however, came over her when



the full torrent of his information overtook her, as in a moment of unguarded confidence he coupled Basil's name with that of Lady George.

Not till that instant did she herself know how strong was her feeling for Basil. She was true, however, to her womanly dignity, for she showed no sign to Guiseppe, save that for a second a spasm seemed to pass over her face ; but recovering herself at once, she stood clutching the back of a chair and asking rapid questions in a more serious and far less random tone than she had used during the first part of their conversation.

Yes, the rush of the waters had passed over her ; she was not utterly crushed, but like one who has been face to face with a mighty danger, she stood gasping for breath.

Guiseppe Belsospiro was gone, and Blanche Astor, weighing the present and the future in nicely poised scales, was determining what her action in life should be.

To leave England without delay and return to her own country was her first

resolution ; but before she carried it out there was work to be done.

Blanche Astor's was a noble character, and she had no idea of running away without seeing things decently ended up. For one thing, she had set her mind on Venetia marrying the Italian tenor, and to bring that about she determined should be her first care.

She sits for a long time after Guiseppe left her very quietly and pensively for her, since her usual habits tend to activity, and are as a rule of so decided a character that she apparently gives herself but little time for reflection. It is, however, evident that her conversation with the tenor has given her subject for much deep thought, and that she cannot see her way with any clearness through the labyrinth that surrounds her.

She has not told Guiseppe that she has surprised his secret, and she has never been introduced to Venetia, who probably is not even aware of her existence, nor after what she has just heard about Basil does she choose to refer in any way to

him. How then is the task she has set herself of bringing about a marriage between Venetia and the tenor to be accomplished? While she is still pondering over the subject, a footman comes in and informs her that a young person has called about being engaged as a lady's maid.

'A lady's maid!'

Lady's maids and everything else connected with frippery and toilette are far enough from Blanche's thoughts just then; in fact, she had totally forgotten that she was in want of such a being.

'I am engaged; I cannot see her now,' she said rather shortly.

'She has brought this note, miss,' was the servant's reply.

She tore the proffered note open and glanced over it with careless indifference, but on a sudden a change came over her features.

'I will see the young person.'

Another minute or two and Susan Ford stood inside the boudoir door.

'Before I put any other questions, are you willing to go to America?' asked Miss Astor rather brusquely.

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Susan Ford coloured up, and there was rather a pleased expression on her face.

‘I was not aware that the situation was for America,’ she answered; ‘but I have no objection to go.’

Miss Astor looked once more at the letter she still held in her hand.

‘Miss Armfield is willing to give you a reference, but says she wishes for a personal interview.’

‘Yes, ma’am, there are one or two things Miss Armfield said she would explain. I have never been in service before.’

‘So she tells me. Been rather unfortunate in your home?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Susan Ford was all meekness. She had entirely dropped her flaunty pert airs, and looked a very respectable, well-conducted young woman.

Miss Astor questioned her as to her acquirements, etc., and finally told her she would call on Miss Armfield in the course of the morning.

Was it Susan Ford’s appearance that had pleased her, or was it the desire to have a

talk with Venetia, which made her think twice about engaging this young woman ?

The coincidence of Venetia having written about Susan was decidedly a strange one, and Miss Astor was far too practical to throw away the very opportunity for which she had been racking her brain.

Mrs Armfield was out when Blanche arrived in Cobbold Place, thus the two young ladies had the drawing-room to themselves.

Venetia began the interview by briefly stating everything she knew about Susan, adding, which was scarcely true, though Venetia believed it implicitly, that the girl was thoroughly deserving and much to be pitied for having had so bad a mother.

‘In America,’ she observed, ‘she will have a chance of beginning life again under new auspices.’

‘I will take her,’ was the answer, ‘at your recommendation, and do my best to make her happy and good.’

Lucky Susan ! May she have the good sense to redeem the past. To but few girls who have stepped as deeply into the mire

as she had done, is such an opportunity offered.

She had to thank Guiseppe Belsospiro for it. He it was who suggested that Venetia should write to Miss Astor—perhaps he had a sort of hankering to bring these two girls together.

And he was right, for before they parted that day they were firm friends and confidantes. Had they not met on well-known ground—friendship for Guiseppe. There was one subject, however, to which Miss Astor never alluded, her own penchant for Basil, though she made Venetia tell her at some length all about his love for Lady George, and how she hoped that, with the finding of the boy, every obstacle was now removed, though Captain Denis' fearful end must cast for a while a dark shadow over them all.

Yes. Venetia was to marry Guiseppe—that Blanche Astor had quite decided, and when she had quite decided a matter, she was not very likely to allow herself to be nonplussed.

She would 'interview everybody,' she said

to herself as she walked home ; ' the dreaded Mrs Armfield herself, Lady George, even Basil if need be. But first she would speak to the American Minister,' whose wife's guest, be it remembered, she was.

' That fat little tenor who sings so charmingly, of course he would help him. They would give a party for him next week and invite Marly Jones, the *impresario*, to hear him, and of course he would engage him for his next American tour, and his fortune would be made.'

So far Miss Astor had been very successful, but the most difficult part was yet to come. Mrs Armfield's consent had to be obtained.

It was gained at last though through Lady George, for, to use Mrs Armfield's own words to one of her numerous female friends,—

' If her ladyship sees no harm in Venetia marrying Signor Belsospiro, why should I ? Especially as she assures me he is likely to have plenty of money, and what is more, I have strong reason for believing that she intends sooner or later to marry Basil herself.'

And the marriage really did come off before Marly Jones and his troupe started for New York.

The American Minister gave the wedding breakfast, and Blanche Astor was a bridesmaid, having delayed her own journey and schooled herself into meeting Basil for the purpose.

Lady George was not there, on account of Dandy's health and Captain Denis' recent awful fate, nor could Miss Astor ascertain that she was really engaged to Basil, and perhaps she half hoped when she was told that she had gone to the sea-side, that the event might never come off.







## CHAPTER XV.

### FOAMRIDGE.

**A**MID a knoll of trees, whose overhanging branches every now and again sweep the wavelets of an English bay, there nestles, not two hundred yards from the water's edge, a roomy Queen Anne villa of modern construction. It thoroughly carries out the date of its architecture, and is, moreover, a perfect little gem both in its design and its appointments.

It is a warm September afternoon, and servants are bustling about, giving a few last touches to the arrangement of the furniture, to the polishing of various mirrors, brass dials, and metal cups, with which the hall is decorated. In the draw-

ing-room, with its peacock-blue hangings, its soft pink blinds, and its black old English furniture, there is a wood fire burning brightly, and casting fitful gleams over the quaintly-devised tiles. Beside it stands a table, on which tea has been arranged, the old Worcester porcelain being of such a rarity as to make a connoisseur's eyes twinkle with delight. Yet, amid all these artistically arranged home-beauties, there is no presiding genius. It seems from the activity of the household as though they were expecting some one to arrive.

Presently the sound of wheels is heard, grating over the spacious carriage-drive in front of the domain. Two or three upper servants hurry into the hall. The butler, preceding them, receives in his arms the miserable little body of the velvet-clad Dandy. Mercy, on whose lap he has been resting in the carriage, follows them; and then comes Lady George, looking so sad and serious that she can scarcely be congratulated on the restoration of her boy.

The butler places Dandy on a small sofa close to the fire in the drawing-room,

which had evidently been prepared expressly to receive him, and then he goes away to look after the packages.

Dandy stares round him with a sort of wondering expression.

‘Mammy,’ he says, as Lady George comes and stands by him, ‘isn’t it pretty? It’s like the tales in Mercy’s fairy book.’

For Mercy, since Dandy wished it, has once more deserted old Job to stay for a time as the little boy’s attendant, till she should go home again to look after an infant treasure of her own.

Her attention called to the surroundings by the boy’s observation, Lady George looked about her.

‘Yes, my darling, it is very pretty—quite a fairy home. Does my Dandy think he will be happy here?’

‘Dandy likes pretty things,’ he answered. Then, with a child’s restlessness, ‘Me wants to go to the window and look out. Is there a garden, mammy?’

Lady George wheeled his sofa up to the window, from which, across the sweeping lawn, they could see the bay as it lay shim-

mering in the sunlight, and the child gave a cry of joy as the tiny panorama fell with its truly English beauty on his baby gaze.

Lady George, too, was impressed, not only by the natural loveliness of the external picture, but by the loving care with which everything had been arranged for her comfort and pleasure; and as she stood there leaning over the back of the child's couch her eyes were full of tears.

Dandy looked up at her.

'Don't cry, mammy; Dandy's quite well now. Where is Mercy? Tell her me have tea here by the window.'

Mercy was called, and the boy was fed and petted, his mother and Mercy vying with each other in anticipating every wish—Mercy, however, every now and then withdrawing her attention from the somewhat exacting little gentleman to look round her in bewilderment, and expatiate in excited terms on all she saw. A house with appointments and decorations like these Mercy had never beheld before—even the Chapel Street bijou residence would not compare with it.

‘We have to thank Mr Armfield for all this,’ said Lady George. ‘I gave him an unlimited order to prepare a pretty home by the sea for my darling to winter in.’

‘Mr Armfield is tasty, I must say,’ observed Mercy. ‘Lor’, my lady, I shouldn’t have thought any one gentleman’s head could have made up so many lovely things!’

Lady George smiled, but Dandy did not give her time to answer, for he called out,—

‘Tell Basil to come, mammy. Dandy loves Basil. He’ll take Dandy on the water there and let him catch fish. When is Basil coming? Dandy wants Basil *now*.’

‘I daresay he will come soon to see how we are getting on,’ answered Lady George, looking a little flustered. ‘You know, darling, Mr Armfield has business in London to which he is obliged to attend.’

‘Dandy doesn’t care for Basil’s business; he must come at once. You know, mammy, Dandy is to be spoiled, or he will never get well,’ and there was a twinkle in the child’s eyes which delighted the mother’s

heart, darting through it a ray of hope that perhaps in this sea-girt home of beauty her boy might be restored to health.

‘Basil shall come,’ she said, in a half whisper as she kissed the child’s little white forehead, and asked him if he would not like to see the rest of the house.

Dandy got off his couch and managed to walk to the door, but he had not the strength to go any farther, and the butler was once more summoned to carry him.

It was a long journey of exploration, fraught with surprise and admiration, especially to Mercy and Dandy, who both grew so excited in their delight that Lady George suggested it was time the little man should be put to bed.

His tired head laid at last on the pillow, his eyelids well-nigh weighed down by sleep as he kissed his mammy in a semi-conscious state, he whispered once again,—

‘Basil—write to Basil, mammy, dear.’

Lady George went away downstairs into the pretty drawing-room, and as the shades of evening crept over the waters before her, she wrote a long letter to Basil.

It was the first missive, except the merest conventional note, that she had ever sent him, and what that letter contained his radiant countenance perhaps partly revealed, as, two days later, he stood just inside the drawing-room door, and was received by the glad cry from Dandy,—

‘ Basil has come ! Basil has come ! Dandy get quite well now Basil has come ! ’

It was not, however, the boy’s glad cry that made Basil look so different, as he stood against the door-post, to the sombre Basil his friends had known of late. There was a welcome in Lady George’s eyes which he had never seen there before, and he knew that at last his faithful service and enduring love were to be rewarded.

For the present, however, Dandy laid sole claim to Basil’s attention. He clung to him, talked to him, bade him turn his sofa round so that he could see the water ; in fine monopolised him thoroughly, and if the least shadow of a doubt existed in Lady George’s mind as to his having had any

share in the boy's detention, it must have been dispelled now.

She had never told Basil aught of Denis' tale. Even now with happiness before her, she shuddered as she thought of it; but still, in justice to herself, she felt the words must be spoken. Holding both Dandy's hands, as it were to make sure that he would not again be taken from her, in a scarcely audible voice she told the story with which Denis had sought to frighten her mother's heart.

Basil turned deathly pale as he listened; when she had quite finished, he said,—

'And you, Julia—you believed this of me?'

'It drove me nearly mad; you know I lost all power of thinking for a time,' and she bent her head over the boy, so that he should not look into her face.

'Basil had nothing to do with it, mammy,' and Dandy caught hold of Basil's hand and laid it on his mother's head.

'It was a man Dandy had never seen before, that wrapped him all up in a black cloth and took Dandy right away.'



‘Why didn’t you scream?’ said Basil, laughing; ‘you are not half a man.’

‘Me couldn’t—me had a nasty cloth stuffed in me mouth—oh dear, oh dear!—but Basil will always stop here and take care of Dandy now?’

‘Yes, darling, always,’ and Lady George looked up and cast a tender glance on the two beings she loved best in life.

Almost forgetful of Dandy’s presence, Basil’s arm was round her, and the three sat together for some moments in fond embrace; the child was too young to know that anything unusual was going on.

He only repeated over and over again, with the greatest conviction, that he should be sure to get well if Basil were always there.

And he was right; from that day a change for the better took place in Dandy, naturally it was put down to a great extent to Basil’s mere presence, whereas it was chiefly due to the fresh sea breezes and the boating, of which Basil, of course, was the promoter.

After they had been a few weeks at Foam-

ridge, as Lady George's new home was called, for the Chapel Street house was given up, Lord and Lady Craigietoun came down to pay her a visit. Lord Craigietoun was more affable and charming than ever she had believed it possible for him to be, and the fair Margaret was quite *aux petits soins* with her sister-in-law. Still, it was obvious she had not recovered from the shock, not her heart, but her sense of conventionality had sustained in recent occurrences. It would probably be a long time before Lady Craigietoun would again place confidence in any man suing for the position of her friend; yet Henry Denis was Craigietoun's cousin, she would say, as if in self-extenuation.

Basil came backwards and forwards to Foamridge during the Craigietouns' visit, and was received most cordially by his lordship, by my lady with the merest tolerance. She could give no good reason why he should not marry Lady George; but, since she had once decided that the marriage should not take place if she could help it, in justice to herself, she could scarcely smile on it now. Yet Lady George had promised to be Basil's

wife in the early spring of the following year, nor would he be altogether dependant on his wife for riches and luxury, since Lord Craigietoun had volunteered to speak to his chief at the office, and he had promised to give Basil the first good appointment that was vacant. This of course would necessitate a house in London, but the doctors so unanimously agreed that living by the sea was Dandy's only chance of regaining health, that a great portion of the year would always be passed in the beautiful little villa where they had known so many happy months.

By the spring, too, when the marriage it is settled shall take place, Dandy has so far recovered as to be able to run about the garden and meadows. It is scarcely probable that he will ever be a vigorous, strong man—in a less luxurious walk of life he would have succumbed very speedily to the chest disease which had carried off his father in the prime of life; but with care he may live many a long year to be a comfort to his mother, and to be beloved for his gentle loving disposition by all those who know him. No one perhaps helped more in a

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quiet, unobtrusive way to effect Dandy's restoration to health than Mercy did.

She always felt assured that the man who had thrust the black handkerchief into his mouth was Jim, and she considered it was part of her duty to undo this evil work of his.

The only time that Mercy ever lost sight of Master Dandy, after she had helped to find him, was for a few weeks in February, when she went home to Smith Street, when her baby girl was born.

As soon, however, as a change of air was thought advisable, she returned to Foamridge, where Lady George said the two children could be brought up among the haycocks together, and Mercy's loving eyes would, she felt sure, watch them both with equal care.

Old Job was the only injured party in this new arrangement ; he never grumbled, however, but consoled himself by talking to the Amazon in the window, as he had done once before when Mercy left to be married. He was far more easily consoled on this occasion too, for he knew she was happy, and it was a gala day indeed, when, at Lady George's invitation, he shut up the Smith Street shop

and went down to Foamridge a month later for a brief holiday.

It is evening, and the harvest moon looks down in beauty at her track upon the still waters.

Chance or accident, with just a dash of design, has separated the newly-married lovers from their companions. They sit upon the beach, and after a long silence spent in drinking in the rapture of the scene, Armfield stealthily takes Lady George's little hand within his own, and draws it unresisting to his heart. Theirs is a love purified by long delay, sanctified by many a sorrow. Each loves most in the other those things which they may go on loving if they meet, as they hope to do, in another world. At length,—

‘Beloved,’ he whispers.

‘Basil,’ is all her response as she returns the sweet pressure of his hand.

‘Thus—for ever?’ he asks, and her head sinks quietly on his shoulder.

THE END.



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6





